coercive notions re-evolve

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by Serindrana

Summary

First problem: He doesn't know how he got here. Chilton's car, likely, but he doesn't have keys in his pocket, and there's no sign of any vehicle at all.

Second problem: He also doesn't know the extent of the carnage between here and the BSHCI, or even, with any real certainty (a lie, that's a lie, isn't he finished lying to himself?), that he caused it, which means he has no idea how quickly or easily law enforcement will find him.

Together, those problems leave him with very little to formulate an escape plan.

What he does have, though, is a gun and access to Hannibal Lecter's house.

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There's something wrong with Will Graham. Missing time, strange injuries he can't explain, and six dead BSHCI employees. But that's fine; he's on Hannibal Lecter's doorstep with a gun. The answers can't be far off.

Sequel to all of history [deleted with one stroke], but can be read stand-alone.

Notes

Welp.

I thought *all of history [deleted with one stroke]* would get this ridiculous AU out of my head, but of course it just gave me *yet more ideas*. So here we are: Will finally knows that *something* has gone horribly wrong (even beyond what he had already figured out), and Hannibal's the only one who can help him untangle it all. AU from late s1, with the fic starting early s2, during Will's narcoanalytic interview with Dr. Chilton in s2e4 Takiwase. A few small details have changed from canon toward the end of s1, including Abel Gideon being very much dead.

I'll be adding tags as I go, but I've got the main ones up to set expectations. This whole concept is rife with dubious consent, after all. Chapters will go up hopefully once a week.

Chapter 1

Hannibal Lecter has burrowed into his brain.

He's in deep; his voice replaces Will's internal monologue if Will isn't careful (but Will is learning, quickly, exactly how careful to be), and sometimes Will can even feel the ghost of his touch. A hand against his shoulder or his cheek. The rasp of a tube down his throat. His skin itches every time he sits across from this very genteel monster who has chosen him as prey.

Every time, Hannibal Lecter feigns an offer of help. Of friendship.

And every time, it is tempting to believe him, because his mind is desperate to bring its inner reality into alignment with the world at large, and Hannibal Lecter's voice is the linchpin that holds it all together.

So it is time to root him out by force.

The chair Will is strapped to is disconcertingly high off the ground and as uncomfortable as everything else in the BSHCI, a little older and grimier than the funding Chilton pulls in should allow for. It is halfway between a dominance display and a simple lack of interest in the experience of the patients. Chilton's office is, after all, quite nice.

This repurposed hallway, by comparison? Something out of a horror movie. Still, it's private. It's just him, Frederick Chilton, and a nurse who has gotten very good at disappearing into the background. No doubt she doesn't want a repeat of her colleague's fate, per Abel Gideon, redux.

"Before I start asking you questions, I need some confidence that you will be telling the truth when you answer," Chilton says, and Will twists as far as his restraints will allow so that he can see Chilton. Or, more accurately, what he's holding:

A fucking clipboard.

"What's this?"

"A consent form," Chilton says, and Will manages not to laugh in his face. Yes, because consent is *so* important inside these walls. Chilton would never do anything to a patient without *consent*. But of course, since Will asked for this, Chilton assumes he's playing an angle, and further assumes it might have to do with him, not Hannibal Lecter. So he wants a paper trail. "You're agreeing to a narcoanalytic interview," he continues, oblivious to the disgust Will doesn't bother disguising. "You, me, and our old friend, sodium amytal."

Will's jaw twitches. He expected this, of course, courtesy (once more) of Abel Gideon's example. Chilton has a limited playbook. And recovery of memories won't happen with Will's mind in complete control.

This is exactly what he signed up for.

That doesn't mean he likes it.

"A little something to loosen my tongue?" he asks, and the words come out barbed as the nurse slips a needle into the back of his left hand.

"Something lawfully used in the evaluation of psychotic patients," Chilton 'corrects' as Will turns, watching as the nurse tapes down the line. A sense memory scratches at the back of his brain. A needle, but not in his hand, no. The skin of his throat itches below his stubble.

Possibly psychosomatic. Possibly the start of a theory. He frowns.

"What would you use to induce memory loss in a patient, psychotic or otherwise?" he asks.

Chilton's cane clicks against the floor as he meanders behind the chair, out of Will's line of sight. He sounds pleased when he lectures, "The protein synthesis that moves memories from short-term to long-term can be interrupted, but that requires tools and skills. And a certain level of unorthodoxy."

Not an answer. The nurse attaches the IV to a bag of saline. It's cold. Bracing. And, at the moment, unmedicated; it won't be for long. Luckily, sodium amytal does *not* induce memory loss, only a lowering of inhibitions.

"Does Hannibal Lecter possess those tools and skills?" he asks. He tries not to sound too eager. If he's eager, Chilton will withdraw. But if he's a co-conspirator, a little subservient and dependent, Chilton will fall all over himself to present the winning answer.

Chilton doesn't even notice that he's smiling. Doesn't realize he's being played, even when he's ostensibly on the lookout for it. Instead, he quirks a brow, lowers his voice a touch.

"Dr. Lecter," he all but purrs, "has indicated to me that he is open to the unorthodox when it comes to treating patients."

Not what I asked, Will thinks, sourly.

"I wonder how that subject came up," he says, acid in his voice, "sharing stories of the unorthodox." Out of the corner of his eye, he sees the nurse draw up a dose of what must be the sodium amytal.

Chilton hands him a pen. Bares his teeth in a pathetic mockery of a polite smile. "Sign here."

Will signs. The needle goes into the access port. The fluorescents above his head flicker.

And then the world goes black.

There's no sensation of time passing, just a momentary flicker of darkness, and then a flash of red that might just be his eyelids, followed by a familiar front door in full, living color and detail, not half a yard in front of him.

He's been here before, in more ways than one, but reaching for the tools he had back when his brain was boiling in his skull is like flaying the skin from his ribs.

He does it anyway.

My name is Will Graham, it is some fucking time in the afternoon, and I am standing in front of Hannibal Lecter's house.

He wants to scream.

More importantly, though, he does not want the neighbors to notice, because once they start noticing, it's going to take somebody all of thirty seconds to call the cops.

Blood (he recognizes the smell immediately, of course, can't fucking avoid it, let alone the feeling) has dried tacky on his throat, in his beard, in the creases of his palms. It's mostly hidden on the rest of him - though not by his BSHCI coveralls, which are the last things he *remembers* wearing, but by the suit that, at some point, replaced them. Said suit doesn't fit, is a little tight, but he recognizes it.

It belongs to Frederick Chilton.

The blood almost certainly does too, he realizes with a lurch, and has to bear down in order to stop himself from vomiting. He settles on hyperventilating. He bends double and goes to clutch his knees, before realizing that one of his hands is already occupied.

With a gun.

Unfired, he deduces after a moment's blank, horrified staring. No gunshot residue on his hands, at least, and while it feels like he wiped most of his exposed skin clean, he clearly wasn't very thorough, given the stains around his nailbeds.

This amount of blood , his mind supplies, *is not congruent with shooting deaths* .

There isn't any blood on the suit, which means if he did eviscerate Frederick Chilton, he stripped the man first.

That isn't helping. None of this is helping.

The last time he woke up like this, it was mud covering him, not blood. Mud's a lot easier to stage. But if Hannibal Lecter could force an ear down his throat and not have him vomit it up too early, or not vomit it up at all, then he could do this, too, couldn't he?

Except that doesn't make sense. Pinning the copycat kills on Will and keeping him trapped in the BSHCI points to a pathological need for control, whereas staging what looks to be a very violent breakout would change the rules of the game so much that Will can't entirely wrap his head around it.

The alternative, though, that Will had a violent episode involving lost time…

He needs to get moving. Somebody is going to notice him soon, if they haven't already. He's been standing here, panicking, for too long. *Get it together, Graham* , he tells himself, forcibly using Jack's voice.

(That doesn't help either, really.)

First problem: He doesn't know how he got here. Chilton's car, likely, but he doesn't have keys in his pocket, and there's no sign of any vehicle at all.

Second problem: He also doesn't know the extent of the carnage between here and the BSHCI, or even, with any real certainty (a lie, that's a lie, isn't he *finished* lying to himself?), that he caused it, which means he has no idea how quickly or easily law enforcement will find him.

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What he does have, though, is a gun and access to Hannibal Lecter's house.

He doesn't even have to break a window or pick a lock; the door swings open soundlessly at a simple touch. Either Lecter is inside, waiting, or he's so mindblowingly arrogant that he doesn't feel the need to lock his door while he's out. (Will never locked his door, either, but that- that was different.) Will assumes the former and creeps in as silently as he can. He's still, incongruously, wearing his soft shoes from the BSHCI, and despite the blood that's still a little damp against his feet, they're soundless. Whoever dressed him did him a kindness; Chilton's shoes squeak.

As soon as he's eased the door closed behind him, he adjusts his grip on the pistol (fairly standard government issue, so not something Chilton was carrying; a guard?) and checks the safety. It's on. He thumbs it off. He considers dragging on the mindset of any of half a dozen home invaders, but shies away at the last second.

He wants his mind to be entirely, incontrovertibly his for this.

Because the doctor, it seems, is in.

Soft chamber music echoes from the kitchen, accompanied by the wafting scent of roasting fat and the sharp, acrid cut of onion. The closer he gets, the more he can make out; aside from the pop of oil, muffled by an oven door, there's also the gentler, nearer bubble of liquid from the stove. Will pictures the kitchen layout and then tries to place Lecter inside it.

He's aided by the opening of the fridge. No- freezer. And the scrape of metal as something is removed.

Will tongues his lower lip in concentration, slows, waits for the freezer to close, for the soft sound of Lecter turning back to the counter or the island - either will work - and-

He steps into the kitchen proper, gun aimed straight at Hannibal Lecter's head.

"Our last kitchen conversation was interrupted by Jack Crawford," he says. Lecter goes very still, but doesn't look particularly frightened, as if he isn't surprised at all. That only adds to

Will's suspicions. "I'd like to pick up where we left off. If memory serves, you were asking me if it would feel good to kill you."

"Memory does serve," Lecter replies, glancing over at him. He's dressed down, shirtsleeves carefully folded up, apron around his waist. His hair is loosening from its pomade, falling against his forehead. It's only his eerie calm that marks him for what he is, just as it did back in Minnesota, in the Hobbs kitchen. "And I am curious to know the answer. I'm also curious if you intend to tell me how you came to be in my kitchen wearing Frederick Chilton's clothing."

Will's lip twitches into a half-snarl. "More a question for you, I think. Kitchen conversations aside, I find my memory *doesn't* serve quite often when you're involved." He feels the itch of a tube down his throat and can't quite stop his reflexive swallow.

Lecter's head tilts, just a fraction of a degree. His interest is obvious. And infuriating. "Are you missing time again?"

It's a full snarl this time, and Will takes a step closer, still leading with the gun. His finger doesn't tremble where it rests on the trigger. He doesn't say it out loud, but he knows *exactly* how it will feel to kill Hannibal Lecter:

Righteous.

"What have you done to me?" he hisses.

There's the soft beep of a timer, and Lecter glances at his phone. "You will have to be more specific," he says. "May I turn off the stove?"

The simmering liquid Will heard in the hallway is still merrily bubbling away in a small pot, oblivious to the drama. It is filled with what looks like milk and an onion, halved, studded with-

Something. It doesn't matter; Will only looks at it long enough to determine if it's a threat.

And then he thinks of Tobias Budge, who in hindsight was murdered handily, no matter how fortuitious of an accident it appeared at the time.

"No," he says.

Lecter's lips tighten in irritation.

"And step away from the sheet pan," he adds, because that's what Lecter took out of the freezer - a half-sized sheet pan with cubes of meat and fat spread in an even layer across it. It's set out by a heavy, cast-iron meat grinder and another pan holding sausage casings soaking in liquid.

There's another flicker of annoyance. Still no fear. Will's pulse is creeping up, out of the cool determination of when he'd slipped through the hall into something a lot closer to the panic on the doorstep.

Finally, Lecter lifts his hands and holds them, fingers spread, and backs around the island. It puts him closer to several knives. Will's trigger finger itches. There are too many potential weapons in here and Lecter knows the room better. He should shoot to disable. Get him on the floor, *then* ask questions.

He follows Lecter a few steps, shivering, then reaches behind him to turn the stove off himself.

A little of the tension bleeds out of his hostage. "Thank you, Will."

"Today," Will snaps. "Today, what did you do to me *today* ?"

"Nothing," Lecter replies, then raises both hands as Will opens his mouth to object. "I have been here in my kitchen since a little after ten A.M. this morning; several items I had on order came in from my butcher, and I decided to make a day of it."

"A convenient alibi." Will doesn't even try to keep the sneer out of his voice, because the alternative - believing, for even a second, that Lecter *isn't lying* - will break him.

"It is," Lecter concedes. "And I have nobody who can verify it. It is also, however, the truth. In the oven is confit de canard," Lecter adds, nodding to the appliance behind Will, "as well as pork shoulder for rillettes. Both slow roasted for several hours, though the pork is nearly done. On the stove, seasoned milk for boudin blanc. The fatback and offcuts on the island are for the same." A pause. "If you do not trust me in regards to yourself, at least trust that I would not risk ruining the food by leaving it unattended."

And Will does trust that.

Which is why, in a moment of blinding rage and psychic pain, he bares his teeth and pulls the trigger and--

Doesn't pull the trigger.

His finger is not trembling. It's also not moving, at *all* , and Will can't stop a desperate sound from leaking out of his throat. He tightens every other finger on that hand, damn the recoil, damn the impact on his aim, and--

His pointer finger doesn't move.

Lecter's phone rings.

It's shrill, beating out Will's ragged breathing for dominance in the otherwise silent kitchen. Lecter doesn't reach for it, but he does incline his head toward where the phone sits on the counter, a few feet from both of them.

Will's jaw twitches. He tries, again, to pull the trigger. His finger, again, refuses to move.

The phone, again, rings.

“How many people have your personal number, Dr. Lecter?” Will rasps, trying to calculate the chances of it being just a patient calling to cancel versus Jack or Alana, worried for Hannibal’s safety after-- after whatever happened to Will at the BSHCI.

“Not many,” Lecter replies. He looks as irritated at somebody calling him as he did at Will’s refusal to let him turn off the stove, as if this is unbearably rude to him.

“Ignore it,” Will says.

The phone stops ringing.

It begins again less than five seconds later.

Jack, *then*, his mind supplies. He feels sick.

“Let me answer it, Will,” Lecter says, voice even and calm. “It will be more suspicious if I don’t. I’ll buy us time for our conversation, I assure you.”

Will should run. He should run, *now* .

(*And go where?*)

“I’m just as curious as you are,” Lecter adds, as the phone rings yet again.

And that, like how he would not have abandoned a meal in the oven, rings true, too.

“Fine,” he says, and it comes out as a whisper.

Lecter steps closer, close enough to scoop up his phone. He answers the call.

“Hello, Jack,” Lecter says.

The volume is low enough that Will can’t make out what Jack says in return, which is-shocking, honestly. Will backs away, circles around the kitchen island. He keeps his gun trained on Lecter even as he edges closer to a knife block. Maybe it’s something wrong with the gun itself. Maybe…

“That won’t be necessary,” Lecter says, and Will freezes, unsure if that was directed at Will or Jack.

Possibly both.

“Jack, I understand your concern, but Will and I have reached an understanding, as of late.” His eyes lock with Will’s.

Will lowers his gun, not too far that he can’t have it right back on Lecter’s chest in a split second, but far enough that it’s no longer pointed at him. He slowly curls his trigger finger.

This time, it moves. He doesn’t put enough force behind it to fire, and eases off right after.

“That is… unexpected,” Lecter murmurs, gaze narrowing.

Will cants his head, aims again. Just at his knee, not any higher, but-

His fucking finger won't move. Again.

Lecter, of course, sees the attempt. Inclines his head slightly in chastisement. This is- this is ridiculous. He can only pull the trigger if the gun *isn't* pointed at Lecter, and meanwhile the psychiatrist is treating him like a misbehaving child. It goes beyond a lack of a fear response. It's like Lecter yet again knows something he doesn't.

Whatever Jack is saying has Lecter looking him up and down now, analytically. A muscle in his jaw tightens.

"And do you know it was him?" Lecter asks at the next lull. "Could it not be his admirer? We may be dealing with a hostage situation, Jack, not-"

His eyes go flat black, reptilian with a brief jolt of anger as Jack no doubt cuts him off.

"Yes, Jack. I understand." His nostrils flare, just the slightest bit, and then he ends the call and sets the phone down on the kitchen island so that it is closer to Will now than it was before. He also leaves it unlocked. The call log displays Jack's name, and a previous missed call from him.

"It appears," Lecter says, "that you left quite a mess at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. One nurse dead, two orderlies, three security guards." His gaze flicks down, taking in Will's borrowed suit. "Dr. Chilton was not in the list of casualties, however."

"Glad to hear it," Will says, even as his skin prickles, as his blood chills. *Six dead* . Six dead, and Lecter has, Will is quite sure now, been here the whole time. Didn't know any of those details until Jack told him.

That means six people are dead because of…

Him.

And he doesn't remember a second of it.

He has been here before. When they told him he'd killed Cassie Boyle, Marissa Schur, Georgia Madchen, Dr. Sutcliffe, he'd had no memory of it, because he *hadn't done it* . And here, now, he has no memory of it either, and yet-

And yet-

And yet it feels different. Maybe because his brain isn't on fire anymore. Maybe because the physical evidence is harder to fake, and he can't assemble another explanation. Or maybe...

He glances down at his mutinous hand, that only disobeys under very specific circumstances. A conditioned response, maybe? And if so, then what else could Lecter have conditioned Will to do?

“Jack has dispatched a security detail,” Dr. Lecter says as Will looks back up at him. He hasn’t moved since setting down the phone. “He said they will arrive within the half hour, which now leaves you with a decision.”

“What decision?” he asks, voice barely above a whisper.

“Stay or go,” Lecter replies. He offers Will the tiniest of smiles. It’s familiar. It makes his head hurt. “Go, and take your chances. I will not stop you. Or stay. And allow me to hide you.”

“*Hide* me,” Will repeats. He is beginning to tremble.

“Yes. I will insist that Jack’s men remain outside of my home. I do value my privacy. That will give us some leeway, but until the fervor to recapture you has died down, you will need to follow my direction in order to avoid attracting notice.” He blinks, slowly, placidly. “Do you think you could do that for me?”

Will can’t stop himself from laughing. It’s sharp and unpleasant, and he finally thumbs the safety back onto his useless pistol and rubs over his jaw and mouth with one hand. “And you’ll do this- why? Because you *see the best* in me, Dr. Lecter?”

“Don’t you want to know why you were unable to kill me? Why the body was weak though the spirit was very much willing?”

“I assume that it has something to do with our sessions that I don’t remember,” Will says, taking a step back toward the hallway, just in case he chooses to go. Half an hour - less, now, maybe twenty minutes if he disentangles himself *now* - in broad daylight to find and steal a car, get out of Baltimore, get out into the mountains, maybe. He could do it. Probably. Appalachia is big enough to get lost in.

Lecter only smiles. “Tangentially, yes, but I have no answers, only theories.”

Will bares his teeth. It isn’t even close to a smile. “Come now, Dr. Lecter. If you’re going to hide me in your home, surely you don’t think you can keep your secrets from me much longer.”

Lecter nods. Will stops retreating. “No, I do not. If you remain, if you allow me to shelter you, I promise you my honesty in return.”

He says it as if Will remaining is a gift to him, not a risk. That alone means Will should be running.

Will licks his lips. “Did you kill Cassie Boyle?” he asks.

Hannibal regards him a moment, then turns back to the sheetpan on the island. He places it back into the freezer, then unclamps the meat grinder from the counter and tucks it in as well. “Yes.”

Will doesn’t leave.

He’s just killed six people, and Jack is on the way, and fuck *everything* but--

But more than anything, he wants answers.

“I’ll stay,” Will says.

Lecter smiles, then, and gestures for Will to follow him into the pantry. “Good. This way, then. The entrance to the basement is just under here.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

“I appreciate you sheltering me,” Will says (more spits), “but I haven’t just forgotten everything else you’ve done. And you expect me to willingly let you trigger a seizure, while you have me hidden away in your murder basement, because then maybe I’ll believe an absolutely ridiculous conspiracy theory that ***just so happens*** *to position you as my de facto* ***owner****?”*

Lecter spreads his hands as if to say, I can see your point. *“Then we are at an impasse. I cannot help you unless we know what the problem is, and we cannot know what the problem is without testing it. Unless you choose to take my word on faith, which seems unlikely.”*

“You think?”

Another chiding look, as if he’s being childish, somehow.

--

Welcome to the Hotel Murder Basement, please enjoy your stay.

(Thank you to @chaotic_plotter for being the most excellent and accommodating of betas!)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hannibal Lecter has a murder basement.

There’s no other name for it. Hidden below a nearly invisible trap door in his pantry is an immaculately clean basement the length of the house, filled with freezer chests, a table saw, a band saw, an operating table, at least one tray’s worth of scalpels and bone saws and clamps… and that’s just what Will can see as his gaze flits from one end of the room to the other. The walls are closer together than he’d expect, and the ceiling sits a little low. *Soundproofing*, he thinks, a little hysterically from the shock of the last twenty minutes, and considers screaming to test it.

He slows his breathing with conscious effort. He can’t afford to be overwhelmed, has to take in every detail, make sense of it, make sure he has a plan of how to use it if - *when* - it becomes necessary. He isn’t safe here. He can’t be safe here. See exhibit sixty-seven, your honor: the row of carefully labeled caustic chemicals by the stairs.

Dr. Lecter stands at his side, watching him. He is very calm, like this is any other room in his home.

Will flexes his hands and is startled to realize he's still holding the gun. The terrifyingly useless gun he can't pull the trigger of. Slowly, he edges past Lecter into the room and, after a moment's hesitation, sets the weapon aside.

The silence is all the louder after the click of the gun against the metal counter.

"So," Will says, when the silence stretches a little too far, turning his head just enough that he can get most of the details of Lecter's body language in his peripheral vision. His own voice sounds steadier than he feels. His lips twitch with an edge of manic laughter. "Are you going to tell me the meat hook is for when you decide you'll just buy a whole pig and take care of it yourself?"

"No. The effort of subduing and transporting a live pig to my basement isn't worth it. The abattoir my butcher works with does a fine job." Dr. Lecter hums, thoughtfully. "It is less reasonable, I find, to outsource the slaughter of humans. Much simpler to take care of it myself."

Will turns to face him, half expecting to see the tar-skinned, antler-crowned monster of his nightmares flickering into existence in place of Lecter, but no, everything remains painfully literal. His head aches a little. "I didn't know you were capable of being so direct," he scoffs.

Lecter smiles. "I did promise you honesty, Will."

"You did," Will concedes, and shoves a hand into his hair, tugging at the roots just enough to ground him. To remind him he isn't dreaming, no matter the absurdity of the moment.

"There is no other exit," Dr. Lecter says after another moment's silence. "One of the few drawbacks. However, there is a bathroom, as well as a small bedroom, some changes of clothing. You should be relatively comfortable. Would you like a formal tour, or would you prefer I leave you to snoop?"

The word *snoop* in Lecter's cultured accent almost makes Will laugh, and Lecter's head cants with amusement. Intentional, then. Humor to lighten the mood. Fuck, but he hates this. He's stepped through a funhouse mirror and he's starting to suspect there's no going back.

"I am trained to snoop," he admits. "And you have visitors on the way."

Lecter nods, almost a mini bow. "Indeed. I expect it will take several hours until I can move freely again. They will likely want to clear the house, even if I persuade them to remain outside otherwise."

"So I should hold off on a shower?" he asks, and though his tone is bitterly sarcastic, he does want to know the answer. He wants the blood off of him. Wants more comfortable clothing.

It's all so mundane, now, boiled down to logistics. Like this is a sleepover, not a- a hostage situation.

That is what it is, right? Even if he walked into it willingly? Even if he's getting something out of it?

Dr. Lecter turns to regard the door to what Will assumes is the bathroom. "If you can, that would be best. However, if you'd rather not wait, I can run a load of laundry. It should disguise the sound of the pipes."

Frighteningly accommodating and analytical. And, on some level, Lecter is threatening him. Will won't be able to signal that he's trapped down here.

"Run the laundry," he says, because at least it might inconvenience him.

Lecter nods, then gestures for Will to follow him. He leads Will over to a series of small, flat screens arranged on one of the tables. They are all off, and Lecter only activates and unlocks one that, when it comes to life, shows a clear image of his empty kitchen. The pot of milk is visible on the stove. "This camera and the associated audio is only one way," he says, stepping back and regarding Will. "But I thought it might give you some comfort, having a window to the outside world."

"A baby monitor for your kitchen," he mutters. It's smart, though. He's sure when Lecter is… at work, down here, these screens are filled with views of most rooms in the house and all approaches, the better not to be taken by surprise.

It's elaborate. It's well-established. He'd known ever since Cassie Boyle that the Copycat was not a fledgling killer; everything was too pristine, too elaborate. But the scope of what's around him suggests that being the Copycat is only a very small fraction of Lecter's pathology.

The rest of that pathology lingers at the edge of his awareness like an enflamed tooth. He prods it with his tongue.

"You're going to leave me down here with all of these weapons," Will says, turning slowly, taking in every resource around him anew. Knives and clamps and vacuum packers. The chest freezers. The bone saws. Arranged like medical equipment, like art supplies.

"Do you anticipate that being a problem?" Dr. Lecter asks. He doesn't sound worried in the slightest. He's confident and, more than that, has earned that confidence. He's been doing this for a long time.

"Why should I think a knife will work where a gun wouldn't?" Will asks, facing Dr. Lecter once again. He holds the other man's gaze. It's like the placid surface of a lake, reflecting only Will's own settling agitation, his growing interest.

Dr. Lecter looks him up and down, then nods, satisfied with something. "No, it probably wouldn't," he says, then pointedly turns his back on Will and heads for the stairs. "We'll discuss the why of it tonight, then. I look forward to it."

The abscess beneath the tooth gives way. The tangle of inputs unsnarls into an orderly whole.

“You’re the Chesapeake Ripper,” Will says, and there’s awe and a little fear alongside the numb resignation. He’s waited a long time for this moment.

Both of them have.

Lecter looks back, smiles again. “Yes,” he confirms. “Now, please rest. I will bring you dinner when it’s safe to do so.”

And then he’s gone, and Will hears the soft thud of something being moved into place above the door, locking him inside. Will watches the screen as Lecter reappears in his kitchen, retrieves the sheet pan and meat grinder from the freezer, and strains the pot from the stove into a stainless steel bowl. He adds a few slices of bread, then turns to check the oven.

About thirty seconds later, their discussion about the meat hook combines with the image of Hannibal Lecter beginning to feed chunks of chilled meat and fat into the grinder, and Will finally understands just what the Chesapeake Ripper does with the organs he takes.

He eats them.

Because of course he does.

In the larger context of both the day he’s had and the *life* he’s had, he supposes cannibalism isn’t that big of a deal. What’s one more taboo, after everything he’s seen? He’s missing the gut-deep revulsion he knows other people have at the very thought, and only feels the vague nausea of being deceived as he turns the thought over and paces around the room he’s in, drinking in all the details idly.

It’s everything else that’s overwhelming. As he fingers a scalpel, he sees every Ripper crime scene photo he’s ever used in a lecture and remembers, and feels again, with every little yellow evidence marking placard, the horror and beauty of each tableau. The confidence, the control, the bubbling, clarified darkness that has, in the past, threatened to wash Will right out of his mind.

He thinks of nights in Wolf Trap, a few fingers of whiskey in, rubbing his thumb across the gloss of a photo of Miriam Lass, wondering what it must have been like to get that close.

Well. He knows, now, doesn’t he? And he didn’t even see it until it was too late.

He finds himself back in front of the little screen. Sausage links are now carefully ordered on another tray, but Lecter is nowhere to be seen. Off talking to the agents who have no doubt arrived by now, then.

Will is fixating. He knows he’s fixating. It’s a lot easier, after all, to deal with the revealed enigma that is Hannibal Lecter than it will be to face the evidence of what he’s done.

Been made to do.

Some mix of both, he suspects.

The bathroom shares some of the same utilitarian features as the rest of the murder basement, including harsh lighting the better to see exactly how much blood is dried into his stubble. It's unforgiving as Will peels himself out of Frederick's suit. There's blood under it, where it must have soaked through his BSHCI coveralls, and several bruises have bloomed across his legs and ribs. He aches when he moves, something he hadn't noticed until now, and his head is pounding.

He scrutinizes every inch of his face, looking for some clue, but all he finds is himself: a little drawn, a little exhausted, a little afraid. Entirely familiar, except entirely not.

He doesn't know what he's capable of. Not really.

Once he's completely undressed, he turns on the shower and steps into the already steaming mist. It is, frustratingly, perfect. Incredible water pressure (far better than what his place in Wolf Trap managed on a good day) and complete privacy (unlike the BSHCI, and he will be happy to forget shower days there as soon as he can). This is only for post-kill clean up, but Lecter has outfitted it fully, of course. The shampoo is from Italy, with at least some of the ingredients coming from a specific farm somewhere in Messina, if the label is to be believed. There's a real sea sponge loofah. There's some kind of salt scrub with a faint but seductive scent that he grudgingly uses, only to find it gets the blood off much more quickly than just water.

He wants to be stubborn. He doesn't want to give in to every generous 'offer' Lecter makes him. But he concedes to practicality and the desperate need to feel a little pampered, and uses everything on offer.

After, he wraps a towel around his hips and sidesteps the pile of bloody clothing. He pads out into the basement proper and checks the screen. Lecter is back, alone, and appears to be poaching the sausages. He doesn't glance at the camera, which must be set up in or just below one of the cabinets by the window.

Will lingers for a few minutes. It feels… intimate. Not quite a violation of Hannibal's privacy, because Hannibal unlocked the screen for him, but it's nice, seeing him without being seen in return. Just the way Will likes it.

When he pulls himself away, it's to go in search of the "small bedroom" and clean clothing. Why Lecter would keep a bedroom down here is confusing up until Will finds it and opens the door, revealing something halfway between a luxury hotel room and a hospital room. There are two lighting options (clinical and lush), and there's a host of medical equipment pushed neatly against the far wall. Heart rate monitors, IV stands, what looks like a ventilator. The bed itself is a high-end hospital bed, though the sheets look much nicer than what he remembers from the last two times he was admitted.

There are restraints attached to the rails.

"You've brought at least one victim here before," he murmurs. "Kept them alive for days, possibly weeks. Why?"

It doesn't matter, not now, but that doesn't stop his mind from slipping sideways, doesn't keep the pendulum from swinging. He's trained himself too well, and it's a distraction from himself.

"My basement is an abattoir, and I am efficient in my slaughter. Adrenaline alters the flavor of the meat, makes it sour. I am a perfectionist in all things, and cannot allow that." He pauses, frowns. That doesn't fit the Ripper's pathology; all his victims were mutilated pre-mortem. He works his jaw, turns it over, tries to fit two jagged puzzle pieces together.

Then he rotates one and they click.

"I kill for a variety of reasons," he says, approaching the bed. "Those I harvest for their flesh alone, I kill quickly. I am not Garret Jacob Hobbs; it is not important that I *honor every part*, but there is much in the body that is worthwhile. That is… *tasty*." He tilts his head, birdlike. "I leave very little behind, and hide it well. When I kill for my art, by contrast, it is the process as well as the final display that matters. It is important that the pig sees what is coming from it. This taints the meat, but not the organs; they are more robust. My harvest serves a dual purpose; it is functional, and it is a signature that vexes the masses of my enemy, who roil with confusion and doubt in my wake."

Another step brings him to the bed itself. He strokes a hand over the pillow. It's dense and soft. "And then," he murmurs, "there are those I take purely to prod at the beast that is my enemy. Miriam Lass resides in my home for some time. I keep her drugged and attended to, the better to utilize her most effectively. Her arm is chilled only a day or two after I remove it from her body, just enough to obscure the timing of its amputation, but not enough to risk any amount of cellular degradation."

His eyelids flutter. He frowns.

The bed is empty. Miriam Lass is… where? Dead?

Will doesn't think so.

There's no clock on the video screen, but the feed is in full color. He can't see the window directly but given the quality of the now entirely artificial light in the kitchen, Will judges it's well past sunset when, at last, he hears something move over the trap door above. Another few moments, and Dr. Lecter descends with a plate and two empty glasses in hand, wine bottle tucked under one arm along with what looks like a tablet. He is in his customary suit once more despite the late hour.

He closes the trap door behind him and nods to Will in greeting as he sets a place for Will at one of the other worktables. He then sets aside the tablet and opens the wine as if this were any other dinner party of his. Will approaches, eyeing the plate. On it are two of the sausages Lecter made that afternoon, pale and lightly seared, as well as a salad studded with pomegranate arils and crumbled cheese, and a few slices of crusty bread. The plating is as impeccable as always.

"Who am I eating tonight?" he asks, watching as Lecter pours them both a measure of wine.

“Nobody,” Lecter says with a flicker of a pleased smile. “This is actually pork. Boudin blanc in the French style, served with a pomegranate, goat cheese, and arugula salad, with a balsamic maple vinaigrette.”

Will quirks a brow and meets his gaze.

Lecter’s lips twitch toward a smile. “Each animal has its own unique flavor. I find I prefer boudin blanc made with pork only, although some add chicken as well. Please, enjoy.”

Will considers a moment, then fetches a chair closer. He settles down, picks up his fork and knife. “You’ve already eaten, I take it?” That feels like the most likely explanation for the rudeness of not joining Will at the table. It would be far too obvious for him to drug the food. Besides, Will suspects that Lecter would find that… uncouth.

“Yes. It’s nearing eleven.” Lecter finds his own chair, slips the button of his suit jacket free, sits.

“Don’t you need your beauty sleep?”

“I need far less than the average. But I can’t stay for too long; my watchdogs will notice if I don’t move up to the second floor for bed.”

“Better not waste a minute, then,” he mutters, and cuts into the first sausage.

It is, of course, delicious, and though Will trusts Lecter that this isn’t human meat (this time), he still takes a moment to actually *taste* the food. He wants to be able to tell the difference in the future. Based on Lecter’s explanation, there *is* a difference.

Lecter watches closely as he eats, as always (and that has additional weight to it now, knowing that usually he was watching Will unknowingly enjoy forbidden flesh), then sits back in his own seat and takes up his wine glass.

“Did you find everything to your liking?” he asks after scenting the wine and taking a small sip.

“Yes, my accommodations at the Hotel Murder Basement are excellent,” Will says, then takes another bite of the sausage. “You’re incapable of doing anything by halves.”

“I am,” he concedes. “Do you have questions for me, or shall we move to our main topic?”

“If we weren’t under a time constraint,” Will points out, “this would gall you. Talking shop over dinner, directly, not through metaphor.”

“This is a unique circumstance, yes.”

“Main topic,” Will says. “Please, explain to me your mysterious theory.”

“A few questions, first, in order for us to both get our bearings.” He takes another sip of wine, then sets the glass aside. “What happened immediately before you lost awareness?”

Will swallows his mouthful and works his jaw. “I had agreed to a narcoanalytic interview with Frederick Chilton,” he says, lips twitching into a quick, derisive smile. “Had just signed the consent form.”

Dr. Lecter hums. “Did he tell you the specific cocktail he was using?”

“Verbally? Sodium amytal, introduced via the saline drip he already had me on.” His eyes fall half-closed as he recalls the paperwork. “Amphetamine, which he didn’t mention, but nothing else.”

“What was his goal?”

“ *His* goal was just to get me talking. *My* goal was to claw back some of the memories you took from me.” He starts in on his salad. He didn’t realize until he started to eat, but he is ravenous. It makes sense; he hasn’t eaten since breakfast, and the BSHCI’s fare is not… inspiring.

Lecter taps a finger on his thigh, the way he so often did in their sessions. “And instead you found yourself losing time yet again.”

Will shrugs, nods. Takes another bite.

“Was there light stimulation?”

“Inadvertent.” He takes a sip of wine, clears his throat. The eating makes this feel almost normal. Almost like before. Almost like he’s in control, and that they’re equals again. That’s probably dangerous. “The fluorescents were flickering.”

Lecter picks up his glass for another sip of wine, gaze averted as he considers. Will takes the opportunity to bolt down one of the slices of bread, slicked with butter, then rub the fine crumbs from his fingers.

“That could have been enough,” Lecter says at last.

“Enough to- what, trigger a seizure?” Will asks, not picking up his fork again.

“Yes, among other things. Primed as you were, the flickering lights could have caused neurons to fire en masse, like striking many piano keys at once. The dissonance might have fostered a change in your mind.” He inclined his head. “It has before.”

“*Before*. In the sessions I don’t remember.” His fork remains on the table. His appetite is losing ground to his anger. His disgust. He’ll finish eating after Lecter goes to bed.

He pushes his plate to the side.

“Yes. As I said, I think the explanation of what happened today is tangentially related to those.” He puts his wine aside once more and settles his hands, folded, over his knee. “Will, have you heard of Project MKUltra?”

Will's lips pull back in something between an incredulous smile and deep dismay. "Yes," he manages at last. "Long time favorite subject of Coast to Coast radio and a particular brand of paranoia." He pauses, then frowns. "Also the origin of the psychic driving techniques you and Dr. Chilton are so fond of, if I'm not mistaken."

"Among other things, yes." Lecter's finger taps against his thigh again. He's wondering how best to approach this, which means he's about to say something ridiculous, something impossible, and Will stands up. He doesn't want to hear this. He wants *actual* answers, not--

"You have informed me," Lecter says, "that you were a subject of an offshoot program."

"*What*?" He shakes his head, a sharp and abortive movement. "*I* told you- when?"

"When I had injected you with a combination of sodium amytal and amphetamines," Lecter replies, steadily, "and exposed you to a strobe."

When I fostered a change in your mind , he does not add, but Will hears it in his voice regardless. He stares another long moment, then scrubs a hand against his beard, turns and begins to pace. "That's unreliable. Inadmissible in court, and for good reason. I was out of my mind. I likely connected disparate concepts to create a narrative to explain what I was experiencing. You can't honestly believe… what *do* you believe?"

"I believe it is very likely that you were, prior to our meeting and possibly prior to your employment at Quantico, conditioned to react in a particular way to a particular combination of inputs. I expected a blank slate that I could influence-"

"Manipulate," Will corrects, harshly.

Lecter inclines his head. "Manipulate. Instead, I found a fully-formed, defensive personality. Violent, even. Would you like to see the scar you left me with?" A slight tilt of his head to the left. "Or, perhaps, I can show you the one I left on you. Which would convince you more?"

"Neither," Will says, putting distance between them. His mind spins. This is- absolutely absurd. "You've had enough access to me while I've been unconscious, you could make up a story about anything. Could have injured me deliberately while I was in an episode to give you another weapon against me, if needed."

Lecter hums. "Given the similarity of the triggers, it appears that your conditioned response explains your massacre at the BSCHI."

Will flinches at his word choice. "And you claim *you* didn't condition me for that."

"I did not. It certainly puts us both at risk now, doesn't it?"

He's right. His approach would have been far more elegant. Would have likely led to Will either believing, fully, that he was the Copycat himself, or… what?

Becoming a killer in truth, of the same breed as the Ripper?

It doesn't matter. Not right now. He grimaces, takes another lap of the space they're in. "That doesn't explain why I couldn't shoot you."

"That was surprising to me as well," Lecter says. "However, as I said, I have a theory. When I first spoke to your conditioned self-"

First? Will thinks, and wants to scream, and doesn't.

"-after a brief altercation, we came to an understanding of sorts."

"And just what understanding was that, Dr. Lecter?" Will snarls, rubbing at his temple.

"You were previously under the care and responsibility of a Mr. Winston," Lecter says.

A sharp laugh breaks through his fury. (It's easier than actually thinking about the real Winston.) "Now if *that* isn't my subconscious connecting random ideas, I don't know what is. I'm getting very impressed with my brain, it seems committed to mocking you."

Lecter's gaze turns chastising. "Please, Will."

Will looks back at him, then shrugs. "Fine. Go ahead."

"Thank you. You characterized this man as a handler, of sorts. He had been doing a poor job of it, by your account. In fact, you suggested your encephalitis may have been related to his absence. A failsafe, of sorts."

"That's very dramatic," Will says.

"It is, but not entirely out of the realm of possibility. At any rate, at the end of our discussion, you had transferred that position to me."

Will bares his teeth. "Of course I did."

Lecter pursed his lips. "You don't believe me."

"No, I don't."

"Then why could you not pull the trigger? Today, or in the Hobbs kitchen?"

Will's mouth goes dry. "I could have."

Lecter glances at his hand, as if remembering that day. Will licks his lips. He remembers how close he was to killing Lecter, remembers how *good* it felt, how *righteous*. It was only Jack's appearance that had made him hesitate.

Right?

"If you could observe for yourself, would that sway you? I don't think I can get you a copy of the BSHCI's security footage. However, I could record an attempt to induce the state here."

“No. *No*. Absolutely not. I’m not going to let you make me *highly suggestible* again just to see what happens.”

“Because you don’t believe it will trigger an episode.”

“Because I don’t believe my *episodes* are what you’re claiming they are. And because I. Don’t. *Trust* you.”

Dr. Lecter actually manages to look put out at that. “Will,” he chides.

“I appreciate you sheltering me,” Will says (more spits), “but I haven’t just *forgotten* everything else you’ve done. And you expect me to willingly let you *trigger a seizure*, while you have me hidden away in your *murder basement* , because then maybe I’ll believe an absolutely ridiculous conspiracy theory that just so happens to position you as my de facto *owner* ?”

Lecter spreads his hands as if to say, *I can see your point* . “Then we are at an impasse. I cannot help you unless we know what the problem is, and we cannot know what the problem is without testing it. Unless you choose to take my word on faith, which seems unlikely.”

“You think?”

Another chiding look, as if he’s being childish, somehow.

“Is it truly the whole situation that perturbs you, or is it the chemical induction of the altered state?” Lecter asks after they’ve both had a few minutes to stare at each other, Will slowly getting his breathing back under control. “If we were to remove the sodium amytal, avoid inducing a seizure, would the loss of consciousness be as frightening?”

Will opens his mouth to say *yes, yes it would be*, then stops and makes himself actually think about it, because Lecter does have a point; there’s no other readily available way out of this. Being outside his conscious control is unnerving, certainly; there’s no guard against Lecter switching up methods once he’s out of it. But he knows he didn’t kill anybody during his blackouts prior to today. He knows he could drive his car safely. Hold full conversations. He was, in many ways, entirely still himself, just without the memories moving from short-term to long-term storage, as Chilton put it.

“How would that work?” he asks, finally, leaning against one of the counters.

“There is another method,” Dr. Lecter says, and admirably keeps himself from looking too pleased about Will’s capitulation. “I’m not as certain that it will work, but it involves no pharmacological persuasion. Though you might still find it distasteful.”

He stands at last and retrieves his tablet, propping it up so the camera is facing Will. A tap to the screen and it is, Will assumes, recording.

Will eyes Lecter warily, thinks back over what Lecter has said up until this moment and what he knows about both the real CIA program in question as well as the public conception of it. “What, running through potential-- codewords? Activation triggers?”

“Nothing so fumbling,” the doctor says, approaching with measured steps. “But I will need to touch you.”

Will pushes away from the counter, unfolding his arms from where they’ve sat protectively crossed over his chest for the last several minutes. “This is ridiculous. And before you say that you haven’t lied to me once since I arrived today, that I’ll be *perfectly safe*, I am *extremely* well aware that aggressive, unasked for honesty is one of the best ways to hide smaller lies.”

“Will,” Dr. Lecter says. “I promise you will not come to harm. This will only take a moment.”

“Then tell me, what exactly are you going to do?” Will asks, taking a step forward, trying to intimidate. It’s hard, wearing borrowed clothing.

“I’m going to kiss you,” Hannibal Lecter says.

Will stares. His mouth falls open. And then Dr. Lecter is very close, and his hand is warm and firm on Will’s jaw, and Will can’t move because this, *this*, is the last straw, this is too much, this can’t be happening-

But it is.

Hannibal Lecter kisses him, and Will makes a small, confused noise, and has just a second to notice how soft his lips are, and how gentle, before the world goes black again.

Chapter End Notes

Hannibal's hair products in this fic are from Davines, and they smell very, very good.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

As his head clears, he tests his bonds. They hold firm, even though the chair he's in is relatively flimsy, considering Lecter's usual taste in furniture. He wonders how long he's been out. His dinner plate is still in front of him, and while the vinaigrette looks pretty dry, the sausage is still glistening, the fat in it not congealed yet.

Next question: is Lecter in the basement somewhere, still, or has he gone up to bed and left Will like this for the whole fucking night?

Lecter answers that himself by emerging from the small bedroom. His tie is loose. His collar is unbuttoned.

There's a purpling, mouth-shaped bruise right below his jaw.

--

Will finds out exactly what happened after Hannibal kissed him.

This time.

(@chaotic_plotter continues to keep me sane and check my chapters for coherency.)

He's alone when the world comes back into focus.

Will is bound to his chair and he *hurts*. His back, in particular, feels like one huge bruise, and he has a splitting headache. He doesn't know how he got here, or what happened in the interim, except for the last, impossible memory of Lecter's lips on his.

His lips now feel-

Chewed on.

Will amends his earlier non-concern about cannibalism. It may not be disturbing in the abstract to think about eating human flesh, but it *is* unsettling, at the very least, to know that

when Hannibal looks at *him*, he is actively seeing food. That's where the real horror is. It makes everything just a little bit worse.

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Next question: is Lecter in the basement somewhere, still, or has he gone up to bed and left Will like this for the whole fucking night?

Lecter answers that himself by emerging from the small bedroom. His tie is loose. His collar is unbuttoned.

There's a purpling suck-bruise right below his jaw.

Will feels like he's about to throw up.

Lecter pauses when he sees Will is awake, gaze flicking over his posture and features. "Back with me again, Will?"

Will grimaces. "I have no idea how I got tied to this chair, if that's what you're asking."

"I suppose it is." He offers Will a small smile likely meant to be reassuring and fiddles with his collar, hiding the hickey away. "I'm afraid I have to leave you once I've untied you. This went a little longer than intended. Will you be okay?"

"That depends," Will says, "on what *happened*."

"I'll leave the tablet with you for the night. You can watch the video when you're ready," Lecter says. "Do I need to disable the internet access?"

"I'll be a good boy," Will says, then winces. Not exactly the tone he should be striking, given…

God. Given whatever he's about to see Lecter do to him on that recording.

Lecter is still for a moment, then crosses the space between them and circles behind Will to begin undoing the ropes that are keeping him immobile. "I've left some painkillers in your room," Lecter says, hands sure on the knots. "If you find yourself needing them. As you can see, I had to take precautions to ensure we didn't have a repeat of your session with Dr. Chilton."

"I was violent?" Will asks, trying not to shiver when Lecter's breath whispers across the nape of his neck.

"No," Lecter says. "Or, not as violent as the first time I interacted with that side of your psyche. But you are very good at masking your intentions." He's come around Will's side just enough that he can look up into Will's eyes. Will is, for a moment, entirely caught. It's the

combination of delight, praise, and fascination in Lecter's tone, lying just beneath his clinical veneer.

It's also how swollen his lips are. How his hair is slightly mussed.

"Why, exactly, did you think kissing me would work?" Will asks, voice rough.

Lecter undoes the last of the knots, and the ropes slither loose. He steps back, looking down as he coils up the rope into an orderly loop. "It is something your conscious mind doesn't associate with me, but that the persona we are trying to access… does."

Will stares, unable to breathe.

Lecter looks down at him, head cocked, observing. He offers nothing else.

Will can't stay still at that. He jerks up to his feet and puts distance between them, tugging at his hair, all of which only makes his headache worse. He's running out of all the angles from which this entire scenario is *impossible* , and he thinks his head might finally crack open. Just let the darkness bleed all over the floor, drown them both.

"I did not initiate, the first time," Lecter adds, voice quieter now.

Will still flinches. "Get the fuck out," he whispers.

Lecter doesn't argue. He sets the rope on the table beside his tablet, then picks up his wine glass and heads for the staircase. He leaves Will's unfinished plate, his half-filled glass, and the rest of the bottle of wine behind. Will doesn't take his eyes off Lecter until his shoe disappears up onto the main floor of the house and the trap door shuts in its place.

Then Will sinks to the ground and shrieks into his knees.

He takes another scalding-hot shower once he's capable of standing again, even if his only options once he's scrubbed and dry are nudity and wearing more of Lecter's clothing. (Chilton's suit had disappeared while he was- unconscious.) He inventories a whole host of new bruises in the mirror, but is somewhat relieved to find that he *doesn't* have any on his throat. No teethmarks anywhere except, perhaps, on his lips.

(He brushes his teeth three times.)

Once he's as clean as he can get, he holds the towel tight around his waist and all but stomps over to the bedroom. As Lecter promised, there's a bottle of ibuprofen on the nightstand.

There's also a fucking mint on his pillow.

Hotel Murder Basement, indeed.

He bites down another scream as he pulls on fresh pajama pants and an obscenely soft t-shirt and leaves the room without touching anything else. He can't sleep, not yet, and though he really doesn't want to see what the tablet recorded, he has no hope of doing anything besides

watching it. He doesn't want to see it, but he *has* to know. He needs to figure out exactly what sort of fucked up hold Lecter has over him when he closes his eyes.

And he wants to finish his dinner.

He eyes the chair he'd been bound to warily, then hops up on the table instead, legs dangling as he grabs the wine bottle and pours a good third of what's left in it down his throat. (It tastes horrible, thanks to the toothpaste. Will almost wishes Lecter knew. It would irritate him.) Then he reaches over and picks up the tablet.

Lecter's disabled the lock on it; how thoughtful of him. Will almost lets himself get distracted by seeing what Lecter googles in his spare time, but navigates to the camera app when the browser immediately loads up Tattlecrime and he sees a splash of red on familiar stone walls. He'll see what Freddie is screaming about him later.

Maybe never, honestly. Wouldn't that be nice? The one perk of being held captive in Hannibal Lecter's basement: no more Freddie Lounds.

Most of Lecter's photos are, unsurprisingly, of food. His own, of course. Not many, either; it doesn't look like the Chesapeake Ripper keeps an instagram of his creations, or even feels that most of his dishes are worth capturing. Will wonders for a moment if these are what Lecter thinks of as the best, or if these are lacking in some way and he's kept visual records to plan improvements.

His stomach rumbles. He puts the wine bottle down and grabs the fork instead, spears the remaining sausage and takes a few bites, then forces himself to abandon the photos and open up the one video. It takes a moment's one-handed fumbling to get the sound on, so he misses the start of the exchange: him asking Lecter what he intends, Lecter getting far too close (he should have *known*). The first thing he actually hears is Lecter saying *I'm going to kiss you.* It's still exactly as shockingly absurd as it was before.

His face, in the video, is stunned. Almost- pained. Disbelieving.

(Where's the horror? he thinks, distantly.)

And then he's watching Lecter kiss him. The angle catches both of their profiles, from roughly the mid-thigh up. Lecter's hand, the one that isn't cupping Will's jaw, settles on his waist. Will doesn't remember that. He also doesn't remember leaning into the kiss, lips parting, his own hands coming up and tangling in Lecter's hair.

He definitely doesn't remember *moaning*.

But he is. In the video, he is audibly moaning, and he pulls back for just a moment with a grin on his lips, eyes fixed on Lecter's. He says something, it's not entirely audible but might be *"took you long enough,* " and then Will has to watch himself nipping at Lecter's throat, tugging at his tie, looking like he's about to climb the other man like a fucking tree.

An extremely unwanted frisson of interest spikes through his body as he watches Lecter's head tip back, his lips part, both hands on Will's hips now, tugging them closer. This is- this

is *obscene* , and-

And then Lecter's grip shifts and he throws Will into a stretch of wall barely on camera. Will's head strikes hard, and his head lolls. But his grin widens. He licks at his lips. Says something, again inaudible, then quick as lightening gets a hand around Lecter's throat. Lecter reacts with another sharp strike and Will watches himself fall into Lecter's arms, stunned.

He's hauled to the chair and bound. Lecter is breathing hard but not from the small tussle, Will thinks. The tent in his slacks suggests a much stronger alternative.

(Will hates this. He wants to die. He tosses the fork and sausage back onto the plate and picks up the bottle of wine again, takes another long pull.)

It is, of course, fascinating to see Lecter at work. In the footage, Lecter has dropped the veil that covers and sanitizes what he is. Will is finally seeing the Ripper in his element, and it is glorious. He can't deny that. He can't deny that the skill, precision, and restraint on display is an echo of what he's felt at every Ripper crime scene, and that seeing it, himself, is akin to listening to a choir of fucking angels.

He wonders what seeing Lecter kill would be like.

Instead, he just gets to see Lecter finish with the ropes and check the back of his head with careful fingers for unintended damage. Apparently reassured, Lecter touches Will's hands (checking circulation, likely) and then retreats, retrieving his own chair and setting it up opposite Will's.

Like they're sitting in his office, Will realizes after a moment.

In the video, Will stirs. He lifts his head, fixes his gaze on Lecter. He looks… languid. At ease. Not how Will felt when he woke up a little bit ago. No wonder Lecter could tell the difference.

Lecter crosses his legs. Folds his hands on his knee. "I apologize for subduing you so quickly," he says.

Will's lips quirk. "That wasn't very sporting of you." He checks the tension of the ropes, flexing his fingers, rolling his shoulders. "I wasn't even planning on biting this time."

"I had to be sure you would not overpower me and escape. You left quite a mess elsewhere this morning, you know."

Will watches his own head tilt back, letting him gaze up at the ceiling. He's still smiling. He looks wild. A little feral, really. Something in the glint in his eyes, the curve of his lips. He looks *confident* . He looks like Will's felt, occasionally, when he's thinking like a killer. "Escape?" he purrs (there's no other word for it, even if Will feels nauseated thinking it). "Dr. Lecter, I'm here for shelter. Why would I leave?"

“I had to consider you were here to kill me,” Lecter responds, calmly. “Your waking self certainly tried.”

“And how did that go for me?” Will’s image slits his eyes in pleasured delight.

“You realized quite quickly that it wasn’t an option. The physical block was impressive. Tell me, does it apply to any weapon? Are there any other conditioned responses of yours that apply to your waking self?”

“I don’t come with a manual, doctor. How would I know?”

Lecter inclines his head in acknowledgment.

Will takes a moment to look around. “Your basement?” he asks, and sounds somewhat surprised. Like this part of Will’s mind, whatever else it’s been up to, hasn’t immediately clocked what all the equipment surrounding him means.

“Yes.”

“You never told me you had *hobbies*.”

“I have several,” Lecter replies. He leans forward. “Do you not have access to your waking self’s knowledge?”

“Of course I do,” Will replies. “You know I do. It’s just… not readily available. Takes a moment.”

“The better to help you focus on your task.”

“Something like that.” Will smiles, all teeth, then looks up. His eyes dart back and forth. “Ah. You’ve been a very bad man, Dr. Lecter.”

Lecter spreads his hands, as if to say, *You caught me*.

“I’m not sure the CIA would approve of you,” Will adds.

“No,” Lecter says. “Likely not. Does that change what I am to you?”

“Oh no, you’re mine until one of us dies, I think.”

Will, watching the video, goes pale.

Lecter doesn’t credit the proclamation with a response, instead saying, “Tell me, how do you regard your own survival?”

In the recording, Will grins. “Well, I certainly don’t want to die, Dr. Lecter.”

“Of course not. But what does death entail? Your body must survive, but what of you? The you that is speaking to me now. The you that killed all those people at the BSHCI. Do you

exist as an entire person, with an innate drive to preserve yourself? When you say that I'm yours until one of us dies, do you refer to your awareness, or your body?"

"Good question," Will answers, then shifts as much as the ropes allow. He spreads his legs, at ease, and glances once more at all the implements of mutilation and death around him.

His gaze settles on the camera itself.

"You're recording this."

"I am," Lecter says. He glances at the camera as well, at Will's conscious self, then focuses back on the strange iteration in front of him again. "Your waking self wanted to meet you, as it were. You don't believe that I didn't create you."

"Well, you've certainly dug around in my brain in other ways. Can you blame me?"

"No."

Will stares into his own eyes. He can't breathe. He can't let himself believe any of this, but he already knows that he *does* , on some level. He can't untangle any of it enough to figure out if that level is the level he's watching even now, if this is all some nested, convoluted way of hiding what Lecter has done so deep that Will has never had a chance of cutting it out of him, but…

"Did you record any of our other meetings?" the other Will says, interrupting his thoughts.

"What for?"

Will turns away from the camera at last, flashes Lecter a smile. "I don't know. Spank bank?" Then he glances back to the camera just long enough to wink.

(He's going to combust. He's going to die.)

Lecter frowns, the same chiding look he'd tossed Will's way over dinner. "Vulgar thing. No." Will relaxes, just a fraction, and then immediately grits his teeth again as Lecter adds, "I have my memory for that."

On the video, Will laughs.

In the murder basement, Will finishes the bottle.

"Unfortunately, Will, we don't have all night for this conversation. May I ask you a few more questions?"

"Go for it, big boy," Will purrs, gaze fixed on Lecter again. His hips roll a little in his seat.

The wine sits uneasily in Will's stomach.

Lecter keeps that quelling look directed straight at Will. "What was your intention, with your massacre?"

Will wriggles in what might be a shrug. “My *intention* was to end my imprisonment.” There’s no residual anger or panic in his voice as he recalls what Will knows was a bloody, violent altercation.

“No,” Lecter says. Will’s image stiffens, then snarls, apparently not appreciating being corrected. “If it was that,” Lecter continues, unperturbed, “you would have woken up when you were first taken into custody. The chemical trigger is impossible to ignore, it seems, but we both know it isn’t the only thing that can wake you up. *Was* it the first time you woke up while in custody?”

Watching the video, Will leans forward, clutches the tablet a little harder. He hadn’t considered this, that there might be holes in his recent memory, too.

In the recording, Will is silent. He tongues one of his teeth. Draws his legs in a little. “Yes,” he says, finally. “The last thing I remember before today is that night in Wolf Trap, when you didn’t mean for me to wake up.” He bows his head, then looks up through his lashes. “What was that about, by the way?”

Lecter leans forward, elbows braced on his knees. Will finds himself mirroring the posture, both he and his image staring hard at Lecter’s face. “You have made things very difficult. When I put you in the BSHCI, I made sure that I could get you out again. Now, if you are captured, you will have no such outlet. No way to argue against your guilt. Jack Crawford has you on camera slaughtering six people, nothing circumstantial about it.”

“When you put me in the… oh.” His other self scowls. His hands curl into fists. “Is *that* what you were doing?” His eyes slide up, momentarily, that same retrieval tic. His scowl grows. “No wonder I wanted to kill you. An *ear*?” He shoots Lecter a glare. “And you didn’t even bother to just ask me to swallow it?”

“It didn’t concern you,” Lecter says, and Will wants to scream. Wants to storm up out of the basement and drag Lecter out of bed and demand to know what the *fuck* is going on.

He keeps watching instead. The video is almost over.

Will bares his teeth. “Did you consider what would happen if I woke up to find myself restrained? With an amateur poking around my psyche? I could have told him everything, you know. About me. About our relationship.”

“But you didn’t. You instead killed a nurse and broke all the major joints in Frederick Chilton’s limbs, then left him naked and strapped to your examination chair on the same cocktail of drugs he’d administered to you, via the IV that you inserted into his tongue.”

“I made him sign the consent form first.”

(Will can’t stop the startled, horrified laugh that bubbles out of his throat. *What the fuck*, he thinks, and again, *what the **fuck***. But he has to admit that there’s a certain poetry to it.)

Lecter doesn’t look pleased, though, as he asks, “With the pen you drove through his tongue to keep it outside his mouth, before you inserted the IV?”

Will smiles. “That’s the one.”

“Which delayed your escape long enough for a guard to check in on you.” That same chiding tone. Hypocritical, Will thinks, and in the video his other self seconds the verdict:

“Unfortunate, but I would likely have had to kill him anyway. I thought you enjoyed an appropriate tableau?”

It’s getting very hard to argue that this other side of himself is anything *but* himself. He doesn’t think Lecter could have constructed something so layered and so…

Bratty.

“There is a time and a place,” Lecter says, sharply. “This was neither. Where do you intend to go from here?”

“Nowhere,” Will replies, radiating confidence and pleasure. “You’re stuck with me now, Dr. Lecter. Think of all the fun we’ll have.”

Lecter’s upper lip twitches, and then he stands. “Go back to sleep,” he says, sharply, and approaches the camera.

Will rolls his eyes, but tips his head to one side, face beginning to slacken. “Yes, *sir*,” he drawls, eyelids fluttering. And then he goes limp.

Lecter reaches past the camera. He says nothing, which is surprising; Will half expected some summation, some final quip.

But the video just ends.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

He scrolls back the video, puts it on mute, and just watches.

And there it is again. The crack. The quality's too low for it to really be a gleam in Lecter's eye, but that's what it feels like, a window in. Through that window, Will sees...

Jealousy.

Lecter looks at this confident, violent version of Will and feels like something has been ***taken*** *from him.*

And even though it's left Will at his mercy, literally reliant on him for food and shelter and any hope of sanity, if Will is reading this right (and he's almost certain he is), Hannibal Lecter resents what has been done not just to his own plans, but to Will himself.

Will's not entirely sure how to handle that.

--

Will comes up with a new plan, but has to break for lunch.

(Once again, shout out to @chaotic_plotter for being a fantastic beta and brainstorming buddy.)

Will rewatches the video twice more (skipping over those first few minutes; he doesn't need to see *that* again) and can come to no other conclusion except that Lecter is *furious*. It's subtle, because Lecter is always subtle, but he's not holding back as much as he does in public. The muscles around his lips tense. His gaze grows cold and fixed momentarily in the wake of some of the more pointed comments Will makes. His hands go entirely still where they're perched on his knee.

As *intimate* as Lecter has apparently been with Will's other self, he is not pleased with the situation, which is… surprising. This version of himself is far more forgiving of Lecter's 'hobbies'. He is fierce, nearly feral, and comfortable going toe to toe with the Chesapeake Ripper. If anything, Will would expect Lecter to be at least intrigued.

And, perhaps, he was. Before Will blew up his plans.

When I put you in the BSHCI, I made sure that I could get you out again. Will pauses the video, chewing on his lip, wine fogging his thoughts only a little. That confirms his theories,

at least, not only that Lecter intended Will to be arrested, but that it wasn't the sum total of Lecter's plans. The plot had always been arranged such that it could be undone, untangled.

(*How*, Will wants to know. His first mistrial wasn't a glowing endorsement of Lecter's puppetmaster skills. There would need to be new evidence for old, established fact. It would need to be…

Later. That's for later. It's purely academic at this point, anyway.

And he can probably just ask.)

So Lecter thought he was in control of what happened to Will at the BSHCI, only for the trial to go pear-shaped, and then *this* happened. Taken together, it pisses *Will* off, but when he puts himself into Lecter's mindset (glancingly, he doesn't let himself dip too far in because he's not ready for that, not tonight) all he feels when he considers his plans being upended is… irritation. Frustration. Not rage.

And Will is seeing rage in the video. He lets it play again.

Will's alter ego isn't helping matters, of course; he's being crude and impolite, and both are ruffling Lecter's feathers, though he's hiding it well. Where that now-brittle facade of normalcy finally cracks is when he describes how Will mutilated Chilton, and when Will teases him about the appropriateness of the tableau.

It was hard to see on a first review. Hard on a second, even, though he can tell something's there. The problem is that he can almost *see* Chilton in that chair. Can almost *feel* the resistance of Chilton's jerking, spit-slick tongue as he pushes the sharp nib of the fountain pen through the meat of it. Hearing Chilton's screams is unavoidable, though he's not remembering it, not really. He's reconstructing. It makes him feel like his brain is shorting out, like he's filled with static, like he's on the edge of a seizure.

He closes his eyes and takes a few deep breaths and then opens them again when the pendulum threatens to swing.

Right. He's fine. He doesn't need to think about what he did, not right now. He's focusing on Lecter. The rest can come later.

He scrolls back the video, puts it on mute, and just watches.

And there it is again. The crack. The quality's too low for it to really be a gleam in Lecter's eye, but that's what it feels like, a window in. Through that window, Will sees...

Jealousy.

Lecter looks at this confident, violent version of Will and feels like something has been *taken* from him.

And even though it's left Will at his mercy, literally reliant on him for food and shelter and any hope of sanity, if Will is reading this right (and he's almost certain he is), Hannibal Lecter *resents* what has been done not just to his own plans, but to Will himself.

Will's not entirely sure how to handle that.

He sets the tablet down by the empty wine bottle. He's not hungry, not anymore, but he makes himself eat the last of his dinner (which is now cold and, finally, less than perfect). His wine-soured stomach doesn't appreciate it, but doesn't fight him on it either. He drags himself to the little bedroom, too exhausted to think about next steps.

He eyes the mint, decides he doesn't feel like brushing his teeth again, and eats it.

Then he crawls between the sheets and gives over to a far more familiar oblivion. The nightmares are (almost) comforting.

Breakfast is waiting for him when he wakes, set out where his dinner had been the night before: a flaky, cheese-filled pastry, two hardboiled eggs still in the shell, a sealed container of fresh fruit and yogurt, and a thermos of still-hot coffee. No meat, Will notes only once he's finished half of that thermos (groaning and hating Lecter, because it is, of course, exquisite, and just the way he likes it).

A courtesy? Or was it only that there is no way to reheat anything down here, and no way of telling when Will would wake up? Human bacon would congeal just as terribly as pork, Will figures.

The basement is otherwise empty. Lecter's tablet and the wreckage of last night have all been cleared away, and his only company is the glowing screen of the one unlocked camera feed.

Lecter isn't in his kitchen. He may not even be in the house. Will tries to remember what day of the week it is and fails miserably. If it's a weekday, then Lecter is probably with patients, or with Jack. The house is being watched, and he suspects whatever is over the trap door is still in place, but he can work with that. He has what he needs, after all: confirmation that he is well and truly fucked, and that he can't harm Lecter in any way that matters.

Permission to just… run.

There's nothing for him here. No, scratch that, there's Hannibal fucking Lecter kissing him, and video evidence of him enjoying it. There is every reason to leave. There's even every reason for him to turn himself in. He killed six people. He did that, undeniably. He shouldn't be running loose, not when he could hurt people.

But he doesn't want to go back. He *can't* go back, not to the BSHCI, and prison might even be worse. He considers, briefly, suicide by cop - but then he remembers waking up after Jack shot him, and figures his chances of succeeding at *that* are also frustratingly low.

Which leaves him with needing to wait for a better opportunity and, in the meantime, untangle what's been done to him. He's right back where he started, locked in a cage with a narcissistic jailer/psychiatrist who'd like nothing more than to crack him wide open. Except this time, his captor is actually good at his job.

Will doesn't try the trap door. He does finish his breakfast. He even enjoys it, but does his best not to take the next step and feel grateful for it. He's scraping the side of his yogurt bowl when a soft sound leaks from the screen the next counter over, and Will edges closer.

The kitchen is still empty, but the mic is picking up voices. He can't make out the words. He *can* make out the timbre of Jack Crawford's voice.

Breakfast feels like lead in his gut.

He tries to guess where, exactly, the voices are coming from, if it's the dining room or the hall or even farther afield. Wherever they are, he doesn't expect they'll get any closer; Lecter is probably holding them right at the threshold for the microphone, knowing it'll ramp up Will's paranoia, not being able to hear what's being said about him. (Because it's about him, Will's sure of it.)

But it's fine. It's *fine*. Will doesn't care anymore, there's no point to caring. So what if Jack now knows he's a killer instead of just being hoodwinked into believing it. So what if Alana (because now he can hear *her* voice, too) hates him until her dying day. He's never going to see either of them again. As soon as he finds a way out of here, he'll be going very, very far away.

Of course, then Alana and Jack and Lecter all walk into the kitchen, and Lecter is *leading* them, and that entire theory shatters like a sheet of ice atop three inches of snow, jagged and ready to cut the everloving shit out of his ankle.

He sits down hard in Lecter's chair from the night before and watches.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack is saying, "I know this isn't how you planned to spend the next few weeks. I apologize. But surely you see the necessity."

"A few weeks; is that how long you expect me to put my patients' needs on hold?" Lecter asks, circling around the island. Will expects him to get out coffee cups, or make some other show of hospitality.

He doesn't.

"You're free to use Skype," Jack points out.

"I know it's not ideal," Alana adds, "but I'm operating under the same restrictions, and you have to admit you're at much higher risk."

"Am I?"

"He's already abducted you once. By breaking into your office. I don't need a repeat of Minnesota, Doctor." Will can *hear* the scowl. And Jack does have a point. If Will had actually decided to fight his way out of the BSHCI, it would have been to get at Lecter.

"Can you not also put my office under surveillance, Jack?" He holds Jack's gaze, a challenge, for just a moment, then takes up his apron, ties it around his waist. Begins to fold up his

shirtsleeves. It should make him look vulnerable, or at least domestic. Acquiescing, maybe; he's in no state to go into the office.

But he doesn't look any of that. Something is just slightly off about this dance he's doing.

"Not with the resources I have. I'm sorry. As soon as we have him back in custody, life can go back to normal, but until then, we can't risk it."

"Very well," he says as he turns away from them and retrieves a ceramic bowl from the fridge. He takes it to the wooden work table near the island, giving Will a clear view of his face and placing Jack and Alana at his back.

The cloth that's covering the bowl is a cheerful shade of yellow, and when Lecter peels it back, Will can see a taut mound of dough within.

"Do you have any leads?" he asks.

Will holds his breath.

"Not yet," Jack says. "Unfortunately, he knows most of the tricks. We've recovered Dr. Chilton's car, but he ditched it in a camera blind spot, and there's no sign that he even took a second vehicle."

Well. That still doesn't solve the mystery of how he ended up on Lecter's doorstep, but at least his other self didn't lead Jack in this direction.

"We're hoping that either his obsession with you or his desire to see his dogs again makes him slip up," Alana says, softly.

Fuck.

His dogs.

It's been a good tactic, not letting himself think about them. Even though the memory of the texture of Winston's fur would have been a comfort during his incarceration, the risk was too high. Is too high. He doesn't want to think about how, now, there's no chance he'll ever see them again.

Hell, Alana is probably going to adopt them out. There's no coming back from this, not for him.

"Is there a point at which we will consider the possibility that Will has chosen to disappear?" Lecter asks. His voice is clear, a beacon that pulls Will back to himself. Back to his basement.

Which is, unfortunately, the safer place to be right now.

Lecter has the dough turned out on his floured counter now, where he divides it into three pieces. His back is still to Jack and Alana, and neither have moved to come around to his front. It's an interesting bit of theater. It's uncharacteristically rude of Lecter to ignore his guests, even incidentally, and Jack is clearly unsettled and seemingly embarrassed enough not

to force his attention. Meanwhile, Will has a clear view of all the players - something that would have been impossible if Lecter had chosen to work on his counter instead, where the camera would have shown just the crown of his head.

This is all for his benefit. Lecter assumes he's watching.

"I have authorization right now for a month of surveillance time. If we find anything, if there are any incidents, I can probably extend it," Jack says. "Until then, though, you and Alana are to stay in your homes. If you need anything, groceries or the like, just let your detail know. They'll handle it."

Silence. A muscle actually jumps in Lecter's jaw.

"Wait, we can't even go to the store?" Alana says at last, apparently as surprised and displeased by the news as Lecter is. "Jack, can't we just take somebody with us when we go out? This seems excessive."

"He's intelligent, determined, highly dangerous, and no doubt very angry with all of us, after his trial," Jack cuts in. "One month. We can talk about loosening things up in a few weeks, but honestly, if I were him, that's what I'd be waiting for."

"We cannot be expected to put our lives on hold indefinitely," Lecter says. He's got the dough in three even rectangles now, and he turns back to his audience at last, broad hands gripping the edge of the table as he leans against it. "I fear you are overstepping."

"And I fear you're still not taking him seriously as the killer he is, Dr. Lecter," Jack replies.

Alana looks down at her shoes as if she's the one being chastised.

"I value my independence very highly, Jack," Lecter says, and it's not an argument, it's a warning. Will feels himself smiling. A month of no murder, cold turkey.

(And then Will remembers that they're locked up in this house together, and the smile fades a little.)

"I know," Jack says. He's not using his patient, placating tone. He's using his *can we all just move on to the point where you agree with me* voice. "You can thank me when we've got him back in custody."

"Very well," Lecter says. "If you'll both excuse me, then? I have a great deal of logistics to work out."

Alana opens her mouth to say something, but doesn't. Jack looks discomfited as he nods and gestures for Alana to lead the way. Lecter escorts them out of the kitchen, and as Will looks at the dough resting on the little table, he realizes that at no point did Lecter make any pretense at hospitality. No glasses of water, let alone wine, and he chose to work on something that could in no way be construed as for their benefit; whatever bread he's making won't be ready for several hours.

Will wonders if he should be afraid.

Instead of fear, though, Will feels… restless. There's very little to do down in the basement. Over the next several hours, he explores every inch of the space. It's impeccably organized, and the freezers hold nothing that is recognizably human. The meat that is there is broken down into steaks, packed in plastic; the bones he finds are cut into rounds with all the most identifiably human elements (skulls, phalanges, scapulae, pelvises, vertebrae) missing.

Hannibal Lecter is a very neat monster.

And it is no longer Will's responsibility to catch him.

Will turns that thought over in his mind as he watches the man, once more in the kitchen, shaping the dough he worked earlier. Preheating the oven. Will feels a pang of guilt. He should be finding a way to lay Lecter's secrets bare for Jack to find, even if he's got no hope of his own salvation. He's in the inner sanctum of the Chesapeake Ripper, his own actions have, inadvertently, led Lecter to be placed under round the clock surveillance for the next *month* , and he's going to do absolutely nothing with it.

He needs a plan. He needs *some* goal to keep his eye on, or else he's going to get caught up thinking about how he looked on that recording when Lecter kissed him, and-

And that's unacceptable.

Right. So. A plan. First step is, of course, rooting out the part of his brain that thinks killing six people is a reasonable option. Maybe once it's gone, he'll be able to think a little more clearly. Maybe he'll finally stop being a coward and accept that he needs to be locked away for a long, long time. Or maybe, once he knows he's safe, he'll feel better about disappearing into the greater world, building a new life, laying low and fixing boat motors until he dies. Either way, a month from now, he'll have more options.

And Hannibal Lecter is not only his one option of fixing his brain, he's actually a halfway decent one.

As long as he can be controlled.

Will looks back at the screen. The bread is in the oven now, and Lecter is nowhere to be seen. Reordering his life, Will assumes. Coming to terms with the fact that the most illicit thing he's going to be doing in the next month is sneaking down to his own basement like a child who's not supposed to leave his room. No more bodies for him, not anywhere.

The Ripper goes years between his sounders; this shouldn't be too much of a problem. But Will is certain that Lecter isn't *just* the Ripper, that the Ripper is only one facet of his pathology. Only one outlet.

And for the next month, Hannibal Lecter will be, by necessity, *only* Hannibal Lecter, and that will make him dangerous. It also might give Will the leverage he needs. Lecter has every reason to want Will's alter ego taken care of, lest he make things even worse.

(All of this planning and strategizing is so much safer than letting himself think about his victims. It lets him keep the reality of those deaths far away from him. The blood is all gone. The bruises from Lecter hurt more than the bruises caused by his escape.

Or maybe, *maybe*, he doesn't care much about the victims at all. Not really. Not after his time in the BSHCI, and not if he's actually honest with himself. And that thought needs to be buried even farther down.)

Lecter appears back on the screen, and if he acknowledges the camera, Will misses it. A tray of baguettes comes out of the oven. Lecter pulls several containers from the fridge. Will watches idly like it's a network cooking show, then turns away when the camera catches an angle that's a little too close to the video from the night before. He tidies up his empty breakfast dishes instead.

When the trap door opens a little while later, Will is wiping down what's become the dining table, for lack of anything better to do. Lecter comes down the steps without a greeting, bearing a tray stacked with a few books (thank god), what looks like a bottle of beer, and the bread he'd been making, now turned into two large sandwiches, both charmingly wrapped with butcher paper.

"Three square meals a day, huh?" Will mutters.

Lecter inclines his head. "When circumstances allow."

"The security detail primed to assume you're sulking with your wine collection?"

No response to that, except what might be the smallest hint of a frown. Lecter reaches the table and unloads the tray. He narrates, as usual:

"Duck confit with a plum and habanero relish, spiced duck fat spread, lightly pickled radish, and a touch of champagne mustard."

It looks and smells great, of course. And, once again, it's notably not human.

"On a fresh baguette," Will comments, taking his seat.

"On a fresh baguette," Lecter agrees.

"That you made to passive-aggressively communicate to Jack and Alana how pissed off you are," he adds, brows lifted.

Lecter exhales a soft laugh. "So you were watching."

"Hard not to. I don't have much else to do down here." He looks at the tray, now set aside. "The books will be appreciated."

"I thought they might be. I apologize for not thinking of it last night." Lecter looks down at his meal, then stands, goes over to the screens. Will's not sure he's ever seen Lecter interrupt the flow of a meal like that, not after the food's been presented. His fingers itch to pick up the sandwich and start eating, just to drive the inconsistency home.

But then Lecter unlocks all the other screens except for one. Will can see his sitting room, the dining room, the foyer, even what appears to be his bedroom. He feels a little flushed, and he looks at Lecter instead. “More entertainment?” he asks, and his voice comes out rougher than expected.

He will *not* think about what Lecter gets up to in his bedroom.

“And a better balm against isolation than just the kitchen. I realized that hiding spaces from you arbitrarily doesn’t mesh well with our newfound honesty. I do need to keep my study private, however; it appears I’ll be meeting my patients virtually for the foreseeable future.”

“And you really value doctor-patient confidentiality,” Will mutters, the better not to think about how surprised he’d been when Lecter had brought Jack and Alana into the kitchen to ensure Will had the chance to hear the discussion.

The doctor doesn’t dignify that with a response. He sits back down. “Please, eat,” he says, then reaches for the flip-top, dark-glassed bottle.

“That for me, too?” Will asks, even as he picks up his sandwich. He takes a bite. It’s probably the best sandwich he’s ever eaten.

Lecter considers a moment, then says, “Yes. Though I brewed it using human remains.”

He still holds the bottle out to Will.

Will stares at it, putting his sandwich back down. “*How*?” is the only thing he manages to say.

“This current batch uses bones as a clarifying agent, in much the same way that certain Victorian brewers added oyster shells to their stouts. Calcium carbonate binds to impurities at the end of fermentation that then precipitate out, the better to be cleared away. I have, in the past, experimented with meatier ingredients to add additional flavor, but I’ve found I prefer this method.”

“That’s very Garret Jacob Hobbsian of you,” Will mutters.

He takes the bottle.

“Hardly. Historically, many brewers used isinglass, or fish bladders, for the same purpose,” Lecter says, settling back in his seat. “Beer is hardly a death-free beverage.” He watches closely as Will thumbs open the flip top and takes an experimental sip.

He should probably be fighting down the urge to vomit, knowing what he’s drinking, but honestly, he’s curious, and… the beer is good.

“Not bad,” he says, regarding the bottle another moment, before taking a larger pull and then setting it aside.

If Lecter emoted like a normal man, he’d be beaming. Will avoids his gaze, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“Sandwich is good, too,” he adds, then takes another bite of it to shut himself up.

They’re both quiet as they eat. Will has more of the beer, and finds it’s easier to drink with each sip. The sandwich is fatty and rich and just spicy enough. The bread is warm and chewy and tender. He didn’t realize Lecter baked, but of course he does- and does so perfectly.

When he’s done, he finds himself looking around the basement for lack of something better to do. He thinks of the meals, of Lecter’s circumspection in their discussions, of the mint on his pillow. The careful avoidance of human meat (and the disclosure about the beer, something Will would never have expected).

“You want me to be comfortable,” he says. Pauses. Shakes his head. “No, you want me to *enjoy* being here.”

Lecter sets down what’s left of his sandwich and wipes his fingers on one of the accompanying cloth napkins. “Of course. Hospitality is important to me, Will. That has not changed. And though I didn’t intend for this to happen-“

“You’ve wanted it to,” Will finishes for him.

Lecter sits back, crosses his legs. “Have I?”

“Yes. In some form. You wanted me to know who you are, *what* you are, and still sit down for a meal with you. You thought my stay in the BSHCI would get me there.”

“I had hoped,” Lecter agrees. “Though it was in equal measure for my own self-preservation, at the time.” He pauses, as if considering elaborating. “Forgive me, but I expected you’d still be angry with me. After last night. More, after you viewed the recording.”

“Oh, I’m angry,” Will says. He cradles the bottle of beer against his chest, sitting back in his chair as well. “Furious. It’s just not a very *useful* feeling, right now.”

“Anger rarely cares about convenience.”

“I’m good at compartmentalizing, when my brain isn’t on fire.” He takes a drink. “Something we have in common. Though your mask was slipping, up there.”

“They’ll read it as my continuing stubborn refusal to believe the worst of you.”

“Pretty unconvincing, given the footage they’ve got.”

“More convincing than my being afraid, I think you'll agree.”

Will considers. Takes another drink. “How long do we have, this time?”

“Maybe half an hour. Less later tonight. I’ll be able to bring down your dinner, but not much else. I will test how sensitive my observers are, though; I need to determine if they notice when I leave my bed at night.”

“You must want to gut them.”

“The thought appeals.”

Will smiles.

After a moment, Lecter does as well.

Clearing his throat to break the moment, Will stands up from the table. “So. How many times did you interact with- my alter ego?”

“Three times, before yesterday,” Lecter answers, easily. “The first time was during a session after Abel Gideon escaped from custody. You had an episode after theorizing that, as I believe you put it, ‘Somebody got inside his head and moved all the furniture around.’ Obviously, in hindsight, that idea has some additional relevance.”

“A bit,” Will murmurs, pacing, amending his memory of the night in question as he goes.

“I had, on previous occasions, given you sodium amytal and even experimented with light stimulation, but wasn’t pleased with the results. It left you drowsy and minimally responsive.” He pauses, no doubt watching Will for some response, but the admission, though gratifying, is something he’ll deal with later. “That day, I added amphetamines to keep you more present. It… did not go as expected. You became not only present, but lucid, although not entirely yourself. You attacked me, nearly incapacitated me. You also quickly ascertained what I had done to you.”

Will looks back at him. “We fought.”

“There was a day,” Lecter says, “that you would have come to without your flannel shirt. With an injury on your arm that you attributed to one of your dogs.” His gaze dips to Will’s throat. “Though you did not tell me how you planned to explain the marks on your throat to me.”

“Bruises?” Will asks, though his stomach is sinking. Twisting. He thinks he knows where this is about to go, and hopes that this time, at least, Lecter will lie to him.

“Of a sort,” Lecter says.

That’s not *enough* of a lie. Will groans and covers his face. “You’re saying-”

“That our attempts to subdue one another led to…” He pauses, searching for the right words. “Physical intimacy.”

Will makes a sound that is somewhere between a laugh, a groan, and a whine. “Which you claim you didn’t initiate.”

“You became aroused first.”

“*Jesus*. No. Stop. That wasn’t- I wasn’t able to consent, Hannibal.”

Lecter doesn’t say anything, and Will drops his hands after a moment. The doctor’s face has gone blank, though he licks his lips in a small, barely-noticeable motion. His pupils are

dilated, though not entirely.

Will realizes, belatedly, that he addressed him by name.

“You’re correct,” Lecter says, finally. “Though at the time it was difficult to ascertain just how separate your mind was, in that state. You were entirely lucid, just with a different… set of experiences behind you.”

Will takes a deep breath, tries to still the jittering in his body. “Right, I’ve seen the video,” he admits, trying to move them along. “I’m very convincing like that. Is that- is that all that happened?”

“Broadly speaking, but we also discussed what had been done to you. As I said last night, you told me you had been part of an offshoot of Project MKUltra. I had about the same response as you did, but as far as I can tell, you were completely honest. That was also the occasion where I became, in some sense, your handler. You demanded I not leave you.”

“Great. That it?”

“For that time, yes. Do you remember any of it?”

“No.” Not even the bruises. How had he not noticed the bruises? He tries to recall the series of days while Gideon was still at large. It was- it was about a week, he thinks. Maybe not even. Enough time for Gideon to kill several of his psychologists, and then to lure Freddie Lounds and get his hands on Chilton, but that was when Will’s encephalitis was really beginning to rage. It all melts together.

Had *nobody else* noticed the bruises? They must have been healed by the time he shot Gideon. *Somebody* would have seen them at the hospital afterwards, otherwise.

“When was the next time?” he makes himself ask. There’s not a large window. From Gideon to the hospital, to Georgia Madchen dying (and there’s pain there, so much), to him taking off with Abigail back to Minnesota, to waking up on the plane (god, that hurts, that hurts *too much* -), and from there- from there-

“The second time was the night you shot Abel Gideon,” Lecter says, dragging him back to the present, just shy of a fit of hyperventilation. Will latches on like he’s a flotation device, lets him roll back the tape just a little, before everything had gone irrevocably wrong. “You had a seizure in my dining room. Endogenous, likely due to how high your fever had gotten.”

“I remember,” Will says, frowning. “I remember the seizure. I brought Garret Jacob Hobbs to your door, I was sure it was him.”

“It was Dr. Gideon, actually,” Lecter says. He stands, slides his hands into his pockets, like they’re back in his office. Like Will is wandering between curios instead of pacing between power tools.

“You said nobody was there.” Will frowns.

“I lied,” Hannibal confirms.

“Picked up on that,” Will mutters. “But *why* ? Just to see what happened?”

“More or less.” He cants his head slightly, leans back against the table like he used to his desk. Will can see it clearly, and isn’t sure if that makes it better or worse, since he can now *also* picture him and Lecter tangled up on the floor of the office. “I wasn’t expecting the seizure. It was your first, that I know of, without my direct manipulation.”

“And it woke me up,” Will guesses.

“Yes. After I sent Dr. Gideon after Alana.”

“You- *what* ?” He stares, then laughs, helplessly. “Of course. Of *fucking* course, that’s why he went after her.”

“How much of that night do you remember? Do you recall shooting him?”

“I…”

He does. He *thinks* he does. It’s haphazard, snapshots. He doesn’t remember getting to Alana’s. He thinks he remembers Lecter telling him- something. Something that let him know Alana was in danger, and then being left alone, just long enough that he could pick up his gun again and leave. And he remembers standing in the snow. No, he remembers falling down into the snow.

Did he speak to Abel Gideon, before he pulled the trigger?

He doesn’t remember.

And it’s not like Gideon is still alive to compare notes with.

“I don’t know what happened after you left my home that night,” Lecter says, when Will has been silent for too long. He takes a single step closer, then stops when Will tenses. “But we did speak, before you left. You ascertained that I wanted you to kill for me. That I was curious if you would do it, *could* do it.”

“If *I* could do it,” Will echoes, then scowls. “English isn’t really equipped to handle this,” he mutters. “Stop saying *you* when you’re talking about…”

Hannibal quirks a brow.

Will shrugs. “Him?”

“There are times where the distinction feels appropriate,” Hannibal concedes, slowly, as if turning the matter over in his head. “And others where it’s of paramount importance to be clear that you are, in the end, the same person.”

“And right now, I’m asking about the difference. Did you want to know if *I* would kill, or if *he* would?”

“Both,” Lecter says. “Originally, you. But *his* arrival offered a unique opportunity. Our first interaction was brief, and contained to one room. I didn’t know if you would simply return to your usual self once you were out of my sight.”

“That’s why you left the room.”

“And then I came back to find you gone.” Lecter searches Will’s face. “Who was it who pulled the trigger, Will?”

Will doesn’t regret killing Abel Gideon. He never has, not even for a second. But now, now that he knows it might not have really been *him* at all-

It’s not regret, what he feels, but it’s not great, either.

“I don’t know,” he admits. “Not sure I’ll ever know.”

Lecter, to his credit, doesn’t suggest they just ask his alter ego.

Will sucks in a deep breath, runs a hand through his hair. They’re no doubt running short on time. He can’t linger on any of this; best to keep moving, get as many facts as he can. “What about the last time?”

Lecter hesitates.

“The- ear,” Will supplies, thinking back to the video. “That wasn’t a theoretical question, why you didn’t just ask me to swallow it. I wasn’t just recalling the situation, I was *remembering* it.”

“You weren’t supposed to wake up,” Lecter says. “The medications I administered should have prevented it.”

“Why *didn’t* you just ask me to swallow- it?” *Abigail*. “Sounds like I would’ve gone for it.”

“Likely.”

“I do remember it, you know,” Will snaps. “The tube down my throat. I-”

I can still feel it. Still hear the croaking noise as it pushed down to his stomach. Still smell Lecter’s cologne, remember the feeling of his hands bracing his jaw. He shudders, feels his stomach lurch. He turns away.

“I was unsure of if your conditioning would allow you to take actions against your best interest,” Lecter says, behind him. “And I couldn’t risk testing it, not then. There was a limited window in which I could act.”

“Before the meat went bad,” Will whispers.

“And before you ended up in the hospital once more.”

“So? What did you do?” Will looks over his shoulder at the other man.

“I convinced him to go back to sleep,” Lecter says. He doesn’t meet Will’s eyes. He’s looking past him, through him, perhaps back to that night.

Will doesn’t want to ask, but he knows. Lecter was very clear, last night. *‘I did not initiate, the first time.’*

Their interactions the night he shot Gideon were comparatively proper.

“And how *unorthodox* were your methods of tucking me into bed?” he snipes.

“I avoided anything penetrative.”

The better not to leave any evidence. Will laughs, sharply, and sinks to the ground, shuffling back until his spine is flush with the wall. “How thoughtful of you,” Will whispers. He covers his face, still laughing, and it’s not something he can really control. Does he want to know the rest? Is he *owed* the rest? He can picture it, regardless, Lecter on his knees in the kitchen, sucking him off, or them tangled together on the bed, Lecter fucking between his thighs, one of his broad hands wrapped around Will’s-

His dogs would’ve seen it all, fucking hell.

Lecter (*Hannibal*? Should he think of him as *Hannibal* now, knowing just how intimate they’ve been? Or is it better to keep the walls up, even if they’re a lie, even if they’ve always been a lie?) sits back down, and there’s so much distance between them. He doesn’t push. He doesn’t say anything, isn’t even *watching* Will fall apart. He’s also not finishing his sandwich, though he does begin to clean up, stacking the empty dishes on the tray, setting the books by the monitors.

Will watches. It helps, a little. “Anything else I should know?” he asks, once he’s stopped laughing, once he thinks he can talk again.

Lecter pauses. Considers. “Would it help,” he ventures, “to know why I did what I did? Putting you in the BSHCI, framing you for the copycat murders.”

If nothing else, it’s a distraction.

“I am sure you will figure it out with time,” Lecter adds.

“Tell me,” Will says. He lets his head fall back against the wall. “Go for it. Can’t be much worse, huh?”

Lecter politely doesn’t say that, likely, it can be. Instead, he says, “You had already begun to see me, but had yet to turn that lens back to yourself. I had hoped that by stripping you of your illusions, and of the expectations of those around you, that I could allow you to more fully see your own nature. That you would move beyond facile conceptions of good and evil. That you would be able to integrate the darkness in you that you so fear into your conception of self without shame. I have wanted that since well before I became aware of your other self.”

And that hasn’t changed.

It explains… a lot. A staggering amount. It's also deeply unsettling, not least because Will thinks that it might have been working.

A few more weeks, months, in the BSHCI, and where would that have left him?

"I even hoped that you would find a way to strike back at me. To manifest your reckoning." Lecter's eyes look far away for a moment, almost dreamy. "It would have been exquisite."

He feels himself smiling, remembering the jealousy he saw in the video. "You must have been angry. When instead the part of me conditioned to kill brought me to your doorstep. Everything you wanted, but done by the wrong man."

Lecter nods. "I thought, when I first encountered… *him* , that I had been gifted what I was so eager for. It bothered me that it was something that had been done *to* you, and not by my hand, but it was still clearly a part of you. But now I sincerely wish I had never been made aware of the schism inside of you."

"Then help me get rid of him," Will says. "For good."

Lecter nods. "Of course."

Will tries to ignore the warm relief that begins to build in his chest. The hope. *This man used you. Wanted to break you*. *Doesn't matter if he wants to put the toy he broke back together again*. "Do you have any idea where to start?"

"I already have a few theories," Lecter says. "It will undoubtedly require a reintegration, though. As I said, it's crucial that we are clear that you are, in the end, the same person." He stands, taking the tray with him. He leaves the half-empty beer bottle that Will abandoned.

"Reintegration," Will murmurs. "And what does that require, Doctor? Hypnosis? More suggestible states?"

"By some methodologies. Not mine, though. I want you to try something on your own, first."

On his own. That sounds- that sounds good. Safe. Safer, at least. "What is it?"

"I want you to take what you know about your other self, and profile him. Try to find where he originates. If we can find the source materials, we can, perhaps, ease them back into the whole."

Will stands, unsteady, but closes the distance between them. Picks up the bottle again. Finishes it off, then holds it out to Lecter.

"Sounds reasonable," he says. "I'll let you know how it goes."

Lecter takes the bottle and then, with a smile, leaves him alone once more.

Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

“Besides, I didn’t take any of the meds they gave me,” Will says, folding his arms across his chest. “Palmed them, kept them in my cheek until I was alone, whatever I needed. They didn’t want to get particularly close to my mouth.” He tries to smile, knows it comes out as a grimace. “So no risk of withdrawal. Thanks for your concern, but I’m not going to have any seizures, unless there’s something in the coffee you’re not telling me about.”

He pauses. Glares at the coffee.

“The coffee is fine,” Lecter says. “Would you like to hear the roast profile?”

“No,” Will snaps, and finishes the cup to spite him. “So get the fuck out.”

--

Will has an interesting dream. Hannibal has some concerns.

(Continuing thanks to @chaotic_plotter for holding my hand as I agonized over part of this chapter eighty bajillion times. We finally did it!!)

Will’s breath fogs on the kitchen island.

It’s too high for comfort, bent over it like he is. He’s on his toes, pelvis pinned hard against the edge, and Hannibal Lecter’s hand presses on the back of his neck, holding him in place. Will’s fingers splay against the metal as he tries to get enough leverage to push himself back.

Then Hannibal’s hips snap forward and he loses what balance he managed to get. His eyelids flutter and his lips part on a whine. His whole body is liquid heat, and he tilts his hips back and up, tries to get another fraction of an inch of lift out of his straining toes. “Please,” he whispers, when Hannibal doesn’t move, just stays pressed close to him. “ *Please* .”

He can’t remember how long he’s been here like this, and that should probably worry him, but he’s too far gone for that. He’s hard and leaking against the cabinets below the island, and when he scrabbles for a handhold, his fist closes on a section of pomegranate. Seeds split between his clutching fingers, staining his skin almost black in the moonlight.

Above him, Hannibal leans down, close enough that Will can feel his breath hot on the shell of his ear. But still, he doesn’t move from where his cock is seated deep.

“Tell me what you need,” Hannibal murmurs.

"*More*," Will whines.

"You already have all of me, Will," Hannibal says, and Will can *hear* him grinning. His lips trace along Will's earlobe, followed by a light nip of teeth. "What more do you want?"

He wants to feel good. He wants to be held. He wants to not think anymore, why is he *thinking*, nothing good ever comes out of his brain. Desperate, Will tries to rock his hips back and into Hannibal's, hoping actions will speak where his mouth can't, but Hannibal lets go of his neck and holds his hips still.

"I need you to say it," Hannibal murmurs, and his voice is sinful, liquid darkness sliding down Will's throat, between his ribs, along the furrows of his hips. "I need to know this is what *you* want."

Why wouldn't I want this? Will thinks, almost says, but there's something painful, there. Some memory, some knowledge, sharp but elusive, and he doesn't want to chase after it. Doesn't want to know. He doesn't *need* to know, all he needs to do is open his mouth and say:

"Fuck me. Please, please move, I want you to move."

It comes out half-sobbing, but the words are spoken, and in the space of one heartbeat, Hannibal is moving again. His hands tug Will's hips back, a few inches from the sharp edge of the counter, and Will goes happily, spine bowing as he stretches, arches, writhes. Hannibal eases them into a steady rhythm, deep and hard and a little slower than Will wants. But it's so much better than standing still.

Will presses his forehead to the island, groaning, then cries out as Hannibal guides his hips at a different angle. What was pleasure turns into ecstasy, and Will lifts his head, strains to see over his shoulder. It's the first time he's seen Hannibal in what feels like an eternity, and he fixates on the soft fall of hair across his forehead, his pomade no longer holding this late at night. At the gaping collar of his shirt, tie long-abandoned. At the lost, hungry look in his dark eyes, the parting of his plush lips, the peek of crooked, sharp teeth between them.

And then Hannibal slides one hand around Will's hips and grasps his straining cock, and Will whines and fucks into it.

Something wriggles in his mind, though. Something confused, unhappy, something overwhelmed. He wants this, wants this so badly, but that doesn't feel right. He shouldn't want this. Why shouldn't he? His eyelids flutter closed as he ruts between Hannibal's fist and cock, pleasure building. He wants to drown out whatever unsettled protests are stirring in his mind. *No thinking*, he reminds himself.

Except-

Except-

He opens his eyes and looks back and sees, behind Hannibal, the french doors that lead out into Hannibal's small back yard.

Sees through them, because the blinds are up.

Sees the glint of moonlight on tactical armor.

“They’re going- they’re going to notice-” he gasps out, trying to pull away, to cover himself, but Hannibal doesn’t let him. Instead, Hannibal drags him away from the island entirely, one muscled arm snaking around his chest, hauling him back until he’s exposed. He’s entirely naked, while Hannibal is almost fully clothed, and he doesn’t remember how he got here. “ *Hannibal* -”

“Shh,” Hannibal murmurs in his ear, even as his hips piston and circle. His hand curls around Will’s throat, tilts Will’s head back onto his shoulder. “Let them. Let them see you.”

Will claws at his forearm, even as the rest of his body flushes, eager and on display. He’s close. He’s so close, and he can’t untangle fear from delight, shame from ecstasy. He feels free and terrible and monstrous. He feels *good*.

“They’ll storm the house,” he protests on a moan. “Hannibal- what do we do if they see me-”

“Simple,” Hannibal gasps into his ear. “Save ourselves. Kill them all.”

Will comes.

And then he wakes up.

He runs the shower as hot as it goes, his skin flushing red as soon as he gets under the water. A cold shower might have been better punishment for his traitorous body, but the damage is already done and he just wants to feel *clean* . Wants to scrub the half-memory of Lecter’s hands away, wants to drown out the echo of his voice.

Of course, the bath products smell like Lecter. The towels are plush and expensive, not something Will would ever have picked. And there is nowhere in his prison that Will can make his own, not really.

He probably should have expected something like this happening. Between all the revelations he’s been juggling and the forced intimacy between them, he’s primed for all sorts of associations. His imagination has never been kind to him. His nightmares, doubly so.

God, what he wouldn’t give to be somewhere *else*.

Even huddled under a freeway overpass. Possibly even back in custody, which- no, no, he does still have lines he won’t cross. But somewhere with more sky, more water, and no Hannibal Lecter… that sounds nice.

(It also makes him feel lost, to imagine it. He’s not going to dignify that with an examination.)

He avoids the steam-fogged mirror once he’s out of the shower and dried off. He avoids the much-clearer mirror in the bedroom, too. There’s no need to look, not as he pulls on a fresh

set of briefs (extremely soft and most likely from Lecter's own closet, which is another thing he won't think about, beyond deciding that wearing them is preferable to free balling it), then yet another pair of nondescript stretchy pants and shirt, both a little small on him.

These are most likely Miriam Lass's, or whoever Lecter's previous Hotel Murder Basement guest was. They're not feminine in cut or color (the pants are a shade of charcoal, the top a rich teal), but they are an upscale variant of institutional. Not far off from scrubs, really. Comfortable. Possibly revealing on him.

Hence avoiding the mirror, at least secondarily after the real problem.

He'd tried, before he went to sleep, to do as Lecter had suggested: profile the other side of him. He had enough to go on from the video. It should have been simple.

It hadn't been.

He'd stared at himself in the bedroom mirror, since he didn't have the video to focus on. He'd remembered how he looked the other morning, blood carefully cleaned from his face, mostly hidden by Frederick's clothes. He'd channeled the insouciant slouch of his other self in the video, the quick smile, the slight drawl.

This was the man who made Lecter jealous. This was the man who had murdered six employees of the BSHCI because he'd decided he didn't want to be cooped up any longer. This was the man who took every drop of darkness Will had marinated in and let it come gleefully to the surface, leaving Frederick Chilton with a pen through his tongue.

And he looked exactly the same as Will.

He hadn't lasted even five minutes before giving up, and now he refuses to try again. Not on the heels of *dreaming* of him, because that was what it had been, hadn't it? Dreaming of his other self, the dark mirror version of him who asked Lecter if the video was for his *spank bank*.

Will forces socks onto his feet and leaves the bedroom, sheets rumpled and sweat-stained, towel discarded on the floor.

There's no breakfast waiting for him this morning. Good news: Lecter wasn't down here while he slept. Bad news: he's going to show up sooner or later, and Will won't get coffee until he does. On his array of Big Brother screens, Will can see Lecter is awake and, thankfully, fully dressed. It's early morning, if the quality of the light in the sitting room is anything to go by. (Lecter is not in the sitting room. He's in his bedroom, for just a moment, until he steps into the hall, but Will refuses to look at that room even now that it's empty.)

Will also carefully, intently, ignores the kitchen. He doesn't want to see Lecter. He almost turns off that screen entirely, but it'll be password protected the next time he turns it on, and if he leaves it black, Lecter is going to notice.

Fuck. He needs to get himself together. The quiet of the stream feels very far away, but it's the only hope he has at getting away from- this.

It, at least, is more forthcoming than his own fractured mind. Will leans against the counter with the screens and doesn't see the stairs. All he sees is water up around his thighs, cold and flowing, with a wide, open sky above him.

It's not actual freedom, but it's close. (It's still a little lonely. He still ignores it.)

The faint scrape of furniture being moved off of the trap door brings him out of it abruptly, dragging him onto the shore. Will can't make himself turn away. What's worse than seeing the arrogant, murderous cannibal who's been fucking you in your dreams? Turning your back on him.

"Just leave it on the stairs," Will says once the trap door is up, and one of Lecter's polished shoes is on the top step.

He hesitates, then descends the rest of the steps anyway. Will's jaw clenches, and he crosses his arms over his chest in a too-obvious show of aggressive defense. Lecter is going to know something happened.

Well. A lot of somethings have happened. Isn't it fair that Will might not always be so receptive and welcoming?

"I said leave it."

Lecter regards him from the bottom of the steps, tray in hand. On it is what looks like french toast, a new assortment of sliced fruit, a cup of coffee, and some juice. All ready to eat, not ready to wait; how did he know Will was up?

Shower, Will's mind supplies.

Could be cameras, though, and wouldn't *that* be fantastic? Lecter's given him the means to spy on his (almost) every move; Will wouldn't be surprised if it was to balance out Lecter's own intrusion. Turnabout is fair play, technically.

He could just ask, he supposes. But he's not sure what he'll do with the answer.

He decides Lecter heard the shower.

"We haven't discussed whatever pharmaceutical regimen Frederick had you on," Lecter says once the silence has stretched more than far enough. "Extremely remiss of me. Several options that I know he favors have startling withdrawal symptoms. I wanted to check on you."

"I'm fine," Will spits.

"You're more irritable than usual. Having trouble sleeping?"

Will stares at him. *Cameras*, his paranoia whispers. *Do they come with microphones like the ones upstairs*?

"Slept like a baby," he says.

Lecter tilts his head, slightly, and then Will sees his nostrils flare and-

Yeah. Okay. He can probably smell the sheets. Great.

Will is not up to this. Not today. He approaches only close enough that he can grab the tray from Lecter, who relinquishes it without a fuss. Will sets it down on the table with a clatter. The coffee sloshes. “Seriously, I’m fine. So unless you’ve got some *integrating your psyche* worksheets for me, you can get back upstairs to the rest of your life, okay?”

Lecter regards him a moment longer, and then turns to go. Will doesn’t let himself sag against the counter in relief, but it’s a near thing.

Until Lecter stops at the top of the stairs, sits on the rim of the trap door, and pulls out his phone.

“Good morning, Jack,” he says after a moment, voice low and smooth and *smug* . “It occurs to me that Dr. Chilton might have had Will on any number of medications that may be causing severe withdrawal effects in their absence. Do you happen to have Will’s medical records at hand? Yes, of course I’ll hold.”

Will sneers at the perfectly hemmed cuffs of Lecter’s slacks, but says nothing. He picks up the cup of coffee and sucks down half of it instead. It is irritatingly perfect, as usual.

“Thank you, Jack, I see the email. Just a moment.” Lecter is silent, no doubt reading through records Will would really rather he didn’t have access to. “Nothing dire,” he says after a moment, “but sudden discontinuation of the olanzapine will certainly make him feel under the weather. It may also retrigger psychosis, even in the absence of the encephalitis, which may cause his behavior to become erratic.” Another pause. “No, I don’t think that will make him more likely to make a mistake; we have both seen how coordinated and dangerous he can be, regardless of mental state.”

Lecter shifts slightly, minutely, in the hips. Will wishes he hadn’t seen it, though the resultant anger does feel good. Clarifying.

“No, I don’t think he will have attempted to obtain more of any of these medications. I would imagine he resents their use and questions their applicability to him.” A pause, and Will can almost *hear* Jack asking Lecter exactly how any of this information helps him. (It doesn’t; simple as that.) “Still, we must investigate every avenue,” Lecter adds, a clear placation. “I take it there’s been no sign of him? Unfortunate, but it’s early days yet. Please don’t hesitate to call if you have need of me.”

Lecter stands and makes his way down the stairs. Will glares at his shoes the whole time.

“Wonderful end-run around my privacy,” Will mutters once they’re both on level ground again. He takes another drink of coffee. “I told you, I’m fine.”

“Your incarceration at the BSHCI was distinctly unpleasant, I am sure. That you haven’t given it much thought past your escape is perhaps understandable, but we should discuss it.”

“No, we really shouldn’t.” *Because now I know you stashed me there like a wine you wanted to age. Because I only got through the last month because I had your mysteries to untangle and your actions to hate, and now I’m stuck here relying on you for everything. Because I might start screaming and never stop*. “Besides, I didn’t take any of the meds they gave me,” Will says, folding his arms across his chest. “Palmed them, kept them in my cheek until I was alone, whatever I needed. They didn’t want to get particularly close to my mouth.” He tries to smile, knows it comes out as a grimace. “So no risk of withdrawal. Thanks for your concern, but I’m not going to have any seizures, unless there’s something in the coffee you’re not telling me about.”

He pauses. Glares at the coffee.

“The coffee is fine,” Lecter says. “Would you like to hear the roast profile?”

“*No*,” Will snaps, and finishes the cup to spite him. “So get the fuck out.”

“Very well.” Lecter holds out his hand for the empty cup, and Will rolls his eyes and hands it over.

Lightning-quick, Lecter grabs Will’s wrist instead. The cup drops and shatters on the polished cement floor. For one split second, Will is certain that Lecter is about to kill him (why?) or, worse, kiss him (*why* ?), and he snarls and does one better than trying to pull away:

He attacks.

There’s no freezing, no hesitation, as Will slams his foot into Lecter’s knee, but the blow is glancing. He’s unsteady, ruled by instinct instead of practice and Lecter easily absorbs the strike. He hauls Will back against his chest, immobilizing him with a forearm across his throat, a leg hooked around Will’s calf.

It’s so close to how Lecter had held him in his dream that Will shudders and thrashes in response, even as his blood quickens, even as he feels his cock twitch in distinct interest.

“Don’t *fucking* touch me!” he gasps out.

“While I appreciate the need for catharsis,” Lecter murmurs in his ear, and god, but his subconscious got *that* exactly right, “I only meant to check your temperature and pulse, and I won’t be able to explain away a black eye or any more serious injury to the security detail. If I let you go, are you going to take another swing at me?”

If you let me go, I’m going to kill you.

His rage and panic have caught fire like pine-needle tinder. Just like when he stood on Lecter’s doorstep, confused and adrift but knowing that satisfaction lay just beyond that door, Will wants to tear Hannibal Lecter to pieces. Wants to feel the heat of his blood, the fading rhythm of his heart.

It’s not a rational impulse, not at all. He’s not thinking about saving the world from the Chesapeake Ripper. He’s not thinking about whether killing Lecter would bring him

absolution, vindication. All that matters, in this moment, is that Will can't take another second of the anger and confusion inside him. His bloodlust is like hunger, like arousal, pervasive and natural and *powerful*.

He tries to strike.

Will's throat works. His jaw begins to tremble. His fingers itch at his sides. His blood is up, every inch of his skin on alert. But his body refuses to obey him now, refuses to even thrash in place, because it knows what he wants now. And there is still that wretched, unwanted part of himself that would stop him from killing Lecter.

It's not his morality.

That part writhes just beneath a surface that shouldn't be there, a division that he's somehow never noticed before. *That* part's blood is up, too, and it burns his brain, consumes it like charcoal. That part is trying to take over, ride his need in an entirely different direction, away from the impossible contradiction of his fury and the conditioning that stays his hand.

The world spins, and he doesn't move. "It's like I can feel him clawing to get out," Will hears himself whisper. The world is receding, like the pendulum is swinging, but it's not black. The world hasn't gone black. Not yet.

It might, though. And then what will he do? What will he wake up to, after?

"Progress," Lecter murmurs in his ear. Pride suffuses the word.

Will trembles, rock hard and feral. If he's quick, he can snap his head back, crack Lecter across the nose. If he can just turn, he can get his hands around Lecter's throat.

He doesn't move. His vision is fading, like he's suffocating, though the arm across his throat isn't holding him that tightly. "Doesn't feel like it," he manages, and his voice sounds so very far away.

"How did your attempt at profiling yourself go last night, Will?" Lecter asks, like they're in therapy, not locked together in vicious, confused struggle.

Will laughs. It's edging toward hysterical. "It didn't."

Lecter hums in response. His breath is warm against Will's neck. Need and violence tangle together, strangle one another, fall away and leave him weak and desperate. Will shudders.

"Try again," Lecter says, seemingly oblivious. (He's never oblivious.) "You've never felt a transition coming on."

Will's lips stretch in a grimace. "I never knew to pay attention before. I wasn't sufficiently *motivated* ."

And that motivation is still pressed against the length of him, the only thing he's certain about anymore. Nothing else exists.

“I think,” Lecter says, “that the answer lies in between being aware of your other self’s existence and drawing closer to that existence itself. You are feeling something of what *he* feels, I think, and it’s providing you a window.”

“Let go of me,” he begs. “Let go, before something bad happens.”

To me.

Lecter regards him a moment longer, before he finally releases his hold. The pressure of his arms and the heat of his body are gone like they never were, and Will staggers forward, drops to his knees. The world shudders back into focus enough that he can twist and watch over his shoulder as Lecter retreats not just one step, but all the way back to the stairs. Up them. Will, trembling, barely manages not to give chase.

“I’ll leave lunch and dinner up here for you,” Lecter says as he reaches the door. “Any requests?”

Will says nothing.

And Lecter leaves.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

> *He has no idea what time it is. He has no idea how long he's been out. He does know, at least, that he's still dressed in the clothes he was wearing in his bathroom, and he doesn't feel in any way freshly fucked, so that's a relief. He also isn't covered in blood. There are no new scrapes on his knuckles, no whiff of gunpowder residue on his hands, and he hasn't been dragged out of the house and into heavy restraints. For all the violence (and other hungers) he wanted to wreak on Lecter after breakfast, it doesn't seem to have come out along with his other self.*
>
> *Still, he's somewhere he shouldn't be, no doubt doing something he'll hate discovering, and there's a chance he's been seen by Lecter's security detail, so as much as he wants to bang his head a few more times against the door, he holds off.*
>
> --
>
> Will tries to talk to his other self and gets a chance to play dress up.
>
> (As always, love to @chaotic_plotter for keeping me sane while working on this wild ride.)

Will stares at himself in the bathroom mirror.

Lecter does have a point, as much as he hates to admit it. And as much as Will wants to dismiss the feeling of *waking up* that had rolled beneath his skin when he thought of killing the other man as something that's always been there, something that doesn't mean anything, he knows that's incorrect.

Violence is not an impulse Will allows himself to feel without some kind of filter. Usually it's the mindset of a killer. Occasionally it's a more generalized certainty that the violence is hypothetical. But he did feel it in the kitchen the other day, gun in his hand, rage in his blood, and it hadn't come with the stretching, the *unfurling*, of something else.

Even if it's just the by-blow of hormones combined with his unfortunate imagination, he's skirting the edges of his other self's mindset without even trying.

Time to dip a little deeper. Stop looking for differences, and start looking for similarities.

This is what he sees:

Borrowed clothing. A tight coil to his shoulders. Scruffy jaw (growing a little longer than *this* Will Graham likes, but he's not ready to ask Lecter for a trimmer, and is half-ready to be

angry when one appears, silently, in the next day or so), dark circles threatening under his eyes, hair curling against his neck.

A gaze so piercing that he's learned to keep it averted, not just so he doesn't get caught up in the eyes of others, but so that nobody else can look in.

He sees a Will Graham who does not hesitate to kill. A Will Graham who delights in it.

He sees his lips quirk and doesn't remember smiling.

He sees nothing.

Will comes to somewhere that is emphatically not the murder basement. He's on his knees, slumped back against a door. There are no windows, but the room is lit sharply by several crisp lightbulbs, revealing rows of garish plaid suit jackets and matching slacks.

Lecter's closet?

It's bigger than any closet he's ever seen, and he thinks he spots a minibar in the far corner. Groaning, he lets his head fall against the door once more.

He has no idea what time it is. He has no idea how long he's been out. He does know, at least, that he's still dressed in the clothes he was wearing in his bathroom, and he doesn't feel in any way freshly fucked, so that's a relief. He also isn't covered in blood. There are no new scrapes on his knuckles, no whiff of gunpowder residue on his hands, and he hasn't been dragged out of the house and into heavy restraints. For all the violence (and other hungers) he wanted to wreak on Lecter after breakfast, it doesn't seem to have come out along with his other self.

Still, he's somewhere he shouldn't be, no doubt doing something he'll hate discovering, and there's a chance he's been seen by Lecter's security detail, so as much as he wants to bang his head a few more times against the door, he holds off.

He's rewarded a few minutes later by Lecter's voice (*outside* the closet), asking, "Are you awake again, then?"

"Yes," Will says, grimacing when he feels, instead of relief that he's safe, pointed irritation at the circumstances. *Of course Lecter's close by*. He wouldn't be anywhere else, not for the world. "I'm going to guess you didn't invite me up here."

"No," Lecter confirms. He's using his psychiatrist voice. He's been using it a lot, even when he's being ostensibly personable. Will still hates it. "What do you remember last?"

He opens his mouth, then hesitates, makes himself actually go over it. Their breakfast confrontation looms largest, and seems to distort the flow of time around it, condenses down his terrible dream and his second attempt at profiling his alter ego into what feels like a single point. But it wasn't. And differentiating between *unremarked time* and *lost time* is getting to be very important.

“Looking at myself in the mirror,” he says at last. “Sometime after you dropped lunch off.”

He hadn’t eaten it, but he’d heard the trap door open and shut. No steps on the stairs. No intrusion. He’d been relieved. That’s what had given him the illusion of security necessary to face his reflection again.

Now it’s Lecter’s turn to pause. “It’s approaching midnight.”

Wonderful. “Of course it is,” he sighs. He stares, fixedly, across the length of the closet. He feels remarkably calm, given everything, though perhaps that’s just exhaustion. Or shock. Numb might be a better descriptor than calm, but he does prefer it over the rage.

It feels a lot safer, on a lot of levels.

“Were you following my suggestion?” Lecter asks. “Last you recall.”

Will fixes his gaze on the nearest suit. It’s the one Lecter wore to his trial, the day he testified and nearly got Will released. His mouth twists; he can’t guess at his own expression.

“Yeah,” he says. “I guess getting into his mindset worked a little too well. Did I- was I different, when you brought dinner?”

“Not that I could tell. You’d left your lunch dishes up on the stairs, and you didn’t look up from your reading.” Movement on the other side of the door, and if it were any other man out there, Will would think he was fidgeting. As it is, he’s probably straightening his collection of cufflinks or something. “I assumed you were still upset with me.”

Will frowns. “Does he *get* upset with you?”

Strange, to think of them having a relationship beyond screwing Will over and, well, screwing.

“Often,” Lecter says, and Will can *hear* him smiling. He sounds fond. Possibly at the memory, possibly at being able to tell Will at all. “In fact, I’d say we clash about as much regardless of your state of mind, these days.”

Will decides he could do without the reminder that they’re still, somehow, the same person.

“Right,” he says, scrubbing at his jaw and making himself stand up, at last. “So, dinner was normal- when did I- when did *he* come up here? And how? And why did he end up in your closet?” He backs away from the door and turns to face it, scowling. He wants the door open, so he can see Lecter’s face. He also wants it to stay closed for a good long time.

He retreats to what is, in fact, a mini bar and fishes out a decanter of what looks like whiskey.

“It appears *he* broke out of the basement and risked discovery purely to express his grievances,” Lecter says after a moment’s consideration.

Will pulls the stopper out of the decanter. The fumes that rise up are a lot sweeter than he expected. Brandy then. Fuck it, better than nothing. “That had better not be a euphemism,” he

says, then takes a swig.

He bites down a cough when it turns out to be stronger than expected, too. That, or he's out of practice from his incarceration.

"I assure you, it is not."

Will thinks *though not for lack of him trying* might be unsaid, and takes another drink. It goes down smoother this time.

"Then what?" he asks, setting the decanter back where he found it.

"He took issue with what he perceives as my passivity and lack of inclination to help him. Laying low does not appear to be in his repertoire anymore, despite him doing just that for years, perhaps a decade or more, before I encountered him."

"Not content to just be a weapon in your arsenal?" Will goads, though he's simultaneously adjusting his mental image of his other self. "That goes against the conditioning you described. The… ownership."

"It does, doesn't it?" Lecter agrees. "By my understanding, imprisonment by the BSHCI and by me should be different to him, if not to you. But it appears they are the same. Though I have the advantage of him not wanting me dead."

"So what *does* he want?"

"He suggested we kill the security detail and run away together."

Save ourselves, kill them all.

Will swallows reflexively. Stares, unseeing, at the closet door. Readjusts his interpretation of his dream, too, from something reacting to Lecter himself to a message of sorts from his fractured consciousness.

The ringtone of Lecter's phone cuts through the silence. "It's Uncle Jack," Lecter says, and Will winces, forcing himself not only back to the present, but to the larger fabric of reality. It's shockingly easy to lose track of the world in here, existence contracting until it holds just the two (*three*) of them.

Quiet falls as Hannibal answers the phone.

"Yes, of course," Lecter says after a minute. "Do you think it's Will?" A pause. "I see. It's certainly a muddle. But Alana is okay?" Another pause.

Will creeps closer to the door, but he still can't make out Jack's voice.

"Jack, hindsight is a powerful thing. You did all that you could with the knowledge and resources you had at hand."

Will's heart clenches. He knows he didn't do anything (*doesn't he? He couldn't just slip out without Lecter or the security detail knowing, he's still in Miriam Lass's clothing, there's no new blood on him, he doesn't have* ***shoes***, *but-*) and yet he can hardly breathe.

"I will be there as quickly as I can, Jack."

Silence. The sound of a phone being set aside.

"A crime scene calls," Lecter says. "May I come in? It's a little chilly to go out as I am, and my ride won't wait for very long."

Will makes himself take a step back, fingers curling into tight fists. "Who is it?"

"Will, may I-"

"Yes, just tell me who's dead. Who Jack thinks I killed."

The closet door opens and Lecter, dressed in a soft red sweater and loose sleep pants, looks at him placidly. There's a ruddy pressure mark at the base of his neck. No new suck marks. Will's focusing on things he doesn't want to think about because what Lecter's about to say might be-

"Miss Lounds," Lecter says.

Will's train of thought lists to one side, wheels lifted into the air and spinning without consequence.

Then he laughs.

Lecter's lips curl, slightly, and he turns to the rack of suits to his left. It's the middle of the night, and of course he is giving full consideration to which costume he dons. Will watches, even as he rubs at his mouth and shakes his head, disbelieving, relieved and guilty at his relief, a whole mess that doesn't produce any useful thoughts.

Well, except-

"But *who*?" he manages as Lecter pulls a nondescript (for him) suit from the masses. "Very clever, whoever it was, because if I had really been the Copycat and murdered my way out of the BSHCI out of boredom or- however Jack is interpreting it, going after Freddie Lounds likely would have been on my list, and when confronted with the difficulty of getting to you or Jack or Alana, she would have moved up the list considerably, but…"

He frowns. He's been "missing" all evening, and had refused to look at the screens after breakfast.

"Did you go on a field trip?" he asks, looking Lecter up and down.

It's perhaps not realistic, to think *he* could have gotten out with all the eyes now on him, but if he could have, the move makes a great deal of sense. Draw Jack's attention away from

Will's hatred of Dr. Hannibal Lecter to his much better documented loathing of Freddie Lounds, make it appear that Will is indeed still out there at all, and restock his pantry.

But the logistics…

"I have been here all day," Lecter says. "And though I found Miss Lounds to be unspeakably rude, she also had her uses. So no, it was not the Ripper who murdered her, nor the Copycat." He returns Will's appraising look, and Will realizes, rather abruptly, that they are quite close together. The closet is huge for a closet, but small for a room, and largely already occupied.

"Then who?" Will asks again, his voice a little lower this time, a little rougher.

There are no windows in this room, just as there are none in the basement, and anything that happens in here-

But the security detail is outside waiting. He's safe.

(*Who's* safe?)

"If I had to hazard a guess," Lecter says, "I'd say it's your admirer. Whoever killed the bailiff."

"Great," Will mutters, and rubs at his eyes again, as much to put an illusory barrier between them as because he's got a headache brewing.

Then he pauses. Glances up through his fingers. "Not the judge?"

Lecter inclines his head, a challenge, a chiding.

He snorts. "Of course. You killed the judge."

For me, he adds silently.

Lecter inclines his head. "Incredible, what a single bullet added to an existing style can do to confuse provenance." His lips quirk, pleased. "I would of course enjoy staying to discuss it, but duty calls. I must become Will Graham once more."

"Is that what you're calling it?"

His eyes *twinkle*, the asshole.

"Right. Okay, one more thing before- I assume I'll have to stay up here until you get back, so that you can coordinate my unseen return to the basement?"

"It would be safer," Lecter agrees. "But ask." He sets the suit gently down on an upholstered bench and pulls off his sweater, leaving him bare-chested. Will's jaw clenches and he turns away. He could argue, but Lecter will just point out the ticking clock they're operating under.

It's very reasonable for Lecter to get changed here. It's very reasonable for *him* to take issue with it. He opts to be unreasonable in the least disruptive way, for once.

“What would you have done, if I hadn’t shown up in your kitchen? Not conceptually, I understand the concept, your desire to strip everything away and show me what remained, but- would it have happened at the next trial? You freeing me, I mean.”

Lecter hums, thoughtfully, above the rustling of fabric as he shrugs into his dress shirt. “The change in tactics at your first trial was not originally intended as a possibility, though your admirer’s actions made it plausible. I improvised but, as we both know, it didn’t take. But your admirer did have the right idea.”

“You would have killed again, as the Copycat,” Will supplies. He looks at himself in the mirror, then closes his eyes when he sees, behind him, the shadow of movement that is Lecter dropping his sleep pants.

“As the Ripper and the Copycat. Vindicating and exonerating you.”

Will considers it. “You would have to be direct for it to matter, especially if I’d already been found guilty by that point.” He turns it this way and that, considers. “The lures. You have more of them.”

“I do.”

“Using the same sets of remains.”

“And more.” Lecter zips up his fly, and isn’t that both startlingly human and deeply intimate?

Will hazards a glance over his shoulder to find Lecter clothed enough, at least, to be looked upon, so he watches as the doctor ties his tie, shrugs into his waistcoat.

“That would have really pissed Jack off,” Will says.

“Yes, it would have,” Lecter agrees, and flashes him a quick, secretive smile. “I may still do it, given a little more freedom. It won’t have quite the same impact, but I hate to leave a piece unfinished.”

Will regards him, then glances down at the soft clothing he’s stuffed himself into. “Which means you’re not done with Miriam Lass, either.”

“No, not quite. Soon, though, I think.”

“Where is she?” Will asks.

“Somewhere safe.”

Somewhere safe that is not here, which means Lecter can’t get to her for as long as Jack is watching him like a hawk. That’s going to spiral out of control soon, Will figures. Which means Lecter will try something of his own, possibly while handling the crime scene tonight.

He watches as Lecter shrugs into his suit jacket, then selects and folds a pocket square, chooses socks (and there is a variety; how can there be a variety of *socks* ?) and a fine pair of

shoes. He watches the assembly of Lecter's persona, barely rumpled despite the late hour, and can't quite believe the reality of it.

Everything he does edges beyond the boundaries of the possible - the suits, the sheer time demands of all his hobbies, the final execution of his masterpieces with their surgical precision and layered references. It blows past logistical nightmare into something so pure, so heady, that Will thinks he could get lost in it. Knows he has, in the past, when trying to slip into the Ripper's head. He'd crossed into territories he knew couldn't possibly exist, had made himself recalibrate, reconceptualize.

But he'd been right, in his wildest fancies. Lecter is the swarm of dark and buzzing flies. He is the devil.

He is also just a man, gathering up his pajamas from the floor.

"I will try to be quick," Lecter says, "but you know how this can go. It may be some time before I can get you back to the basement."

Or to food, or to water, or to a restroom. "I get it. If I get too desperate, I've always got your decanter."

Lecter's expression sours. "I won't let it come to that," he says, tightly.

Will just smiles. "Have a good day at work, honey."

There's a flash of something in Lecter's eyes, and then he's gone.

The hours pass slowly.

He's too keyed up to sleep, of course. He takes another few swallows of brandy to see if it'll relax him, and, predictably, it doesn't; nothing can be that easy. It does, though, lower his inhibitions enough that his impatient pacing and fidgeting progresses to him actually pulling out a few of Lecter's suits, matching them to memories.

There's the suit he wore to their only official therapy session. The suit he was wearing when Will interrupted his mysteriously abandoned dinner. The suit he wore to visit Will that first time at the BSHCI.

Interestingly, the soft brown suit he'd worn the day they met is nowhere to be found. Will brings it to mind and frowns at how altogether strange it is, set beside all the rest.

He was wearing it for a particular reason, and that reason did not involve his own pleasure, so out it went.

Will's attention at last falls on a suit he doesn't think he's seen before. It's charcoal grey with a blaring red windowpane check to it, with a matching double-breasted waistcoat *and* set of pants. It's so loud that Will can't look away from it, and he finds himself stroking the nap of the wool idly, trying to picture Lecter in it, what shirt he'd wear it with, what tie. It's an odd

game of paper dolls in his head, and not one that he's usually inclined towards. His imagination, for once, falls short. He'd need to see it.

Will hesitates.

Glances at the mirror.

Remembers Lecter's quip about becoming Will Graham once more, imagines him in carhartts and a flannel, busts out laughing.

And then he decides, fuck it, if Hannibal Lecter can become Will Graham for a night, then Will Graham can become Hannibal Lecter. He's got most of the pieces now, after all, ready to be slotted together. An empty suit is a decent focusing point, but so is a mirror.

He's drunk enough not to question himself too much as he peels off Miriam Lass's borrowed clothing and instead slithers into Lecter's shed skin.

It doesn't fit well, of course; Lecter has all his clothing tailored within an inch of its life, and even though they're not so different in height, their builds diverge. Everything is too big in the shoulders, a little tight in the hips. The cuffs hang long on him on both the shirt he borrows and the jacket, but if he's a little uncomfortable, it doesn't show in his reflection. Lecter, no doubt, would hate the minor problems with the hang of the fabric, but all Will sees once he's dressed (a bit haphazardly, no tie because he's not in the mood to tie one, no pocket square because he's not entirely sure how to fold one into anything *but* a square) is…

Well, okay, he looks ridiculous.

He's scruffy and entirely the wrong disposition, but the latter is easy enough to change. He lets his eyes close, lets the pendulum begin to swing. *And what makes Hannibal Lecter tick*? he asks.

But before he can open his eyes, a phone rings.

It's not Lecter's, either his cell or the landline. Even if there is a landline hookup in here (and there might be), he doesn't hear ringing beyond the door of the closet. It's entirely localized, and he frowns, pawing through the hanging walls of fabric in its general direction.

He tracks the sound to the very back of the closet, hidden in a hat box.

It's a cheap flip phone, clearly a burner, and the number calling isn't associated with a name. It might be a spam call, but Lecter hadn't lied about the time; the phone says it's after one now. Still, Will doesn't so much *let* it go to voicemail as he is too frozen to stop it.

And then it rings again.

He shouldn't answer it. Not for any concerns about privacy, but because nobody can know he's here. Except who would be calling Lecter on a *burner phone* who might care? The phone keeps ringing, and he keeps staring, until, finally, he says *fuck it* again and answers it.

Before he can decide whether he's going to say hello or just listen, a panicked voice fills the room.

"Hannibal, fuck, I'm so sorry- *fuck*-"

He knows this voice. He can't be hearing this voice.

"I don't know what to do, I must have miscalculated the dosage somehow, she woke up, like *really* woke up, and- and- *fuck*, she's *dead,* I just-"

And Will, feeling like his own personal apocalypse, whispers:

"Abigail?"

Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

“Died, or you killed her?”

“Jesus, Will!” Abigail hisses.

“It’s important. I need to know where we’re starting from. Natural causes or something else, Abigail?”

Silence.

“I killed six people at the BSHCI three days ago,” he tells that silence. “Whatever right I had to judge is so far out the window it’s in orbit.”

“Holy shit,” Abigail says.

--

Will and Abigail take a moment to catch up, and Will winds up very, very sick of being trapped in the closet.

(@chaotic_plotter is wholly responsible for a) this chapter being coherent and b) me being able to get past this chapter and onto finishing the rest of the fic. Seriously, we wrestled this thing for DAYS.)

For a long stretch, long enough that Will starts to think he really has lost his mind this time, the phone pressed to his ear is silent.

And then, confused and quiet, Abigail asks, “Will?”

Dressed in Hannibal Lecter’s clothing, Will Graham sinks to the floor and tries not to scream.

“Will, are you still there? I- fuck. How are you-”

“Give me a minute,” Will manages. Abigail Hobbs is alive. Abigail Hobbs isn’t dead, isn’t murdered, and she’s calling Lecter on a hidden burner phone, and she’s panicked.

Because somebody else *is* dead.

“Right,” Will says. “Tell me what happened. Not- not the big *what happened*, tell me why you’re calling.”

She hesitates. Probably bites her lip, tucks her hair behind- well. Probably not that. “I’m not sure I should tell you,” she says at last, half apologetic, half desperate.

“You can tell me,” Will says, pressing one cheek into his knee and closing his eyes tight. “Dr. Lecter is currently hiding me from the FBI. Which means I’m in this, too. What happened?”

On the other end of the line, *somewhere* out in the world, Abigail Hobbs takes a few audible, shaking breaths. “Where is he right now?”

“Crime scene,” Will says and somehow doesn’t laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. “They take hours. Probably won’t be back until morning.”

“Right. Uh. I… Miriam Lass is dead.”

Will opens his eyes and looks over at the discarded pile of her clothing. He rolls the idea around in his head. Lecter won’t be pleased. *Somewhere safe*, he’d said of her. Somewhere safe with Abigail, apparently. Somewhere not exactly safe, after all. “Died, or you killed her?”

“*Jesus*, Will!” Abigail hisses.

“It’s important. I need to know where we’re starting from. Natural causes or something else, Abigail?”

Silence.

“I killed six people at the BSHCI three days ago,” he tells that silence. “Whatever right I had to judge is so far out the window it’s in orbit.”

“Holy shit,” Abigail says.

Will waits.

He hears her swallow. “She- usually Hannibal keeps her sedated. I know how to do it, he made sure I knew how, he can’t come out every day, obviously. But I must have- done something wrong, I don’t know. She woke up. She almost got out of the house before I noticed, and I…”

“Did what you had to do,” Will supplies.

“Panicked,” she corrects. “Just like with Nicholas Boyle.” A pause. “Except I didn’t have a knife. I bashed her skull in.”

Will winces. *What a waste* floats through his head, and he pushes the thought aside. *Two years for an accidental death, no dignity or purpose at all* floats after it, and is harder to shove away.

“Right,” Will says. “You’re certain she’s dead?”

“She’s not moving and her skull is… not whole.”

“Check her pulse, please.”

Abigail sets the phone down, and Will hears soft rustling, a muttered curse. He tries to picture it, but instead sees Abigail’s ear in his sink, sees the blood in the Hobbs’s kitchen. Pulls it all apart, begins to reconstruct it. If Abigail is alive, then Lecter staged the scene. He’d have needed a great deal of Abigail’s blood and, of course, the ear. He could have taken both from her by force, but why take by force when he can take by charm? She was already primed to trust him, more than she ever trusted Will.

So- Will blacks out, Lecter arrives shortly after because of course he’d known where Will would go with Abigail, Lecter gets Will back on a plane. Then he proposes a plan to keep a terrified Abigail safe and far away from Will or the FBI, and she agrees. She agrees so quickly that Lecter can be back on the east coast by nightfall, can be there to rut Will’s subconscious into bleary submission and stick Abigail’s freshly-shorn ear down his throat, and everything spools out from there.

Louder rustling on the phone pulls him back to the present, leaving him a little disoriented, a little stunned at the grandiosity of it all.

“She’s dead,” Abigail says. “Shit. How do I… what do I do?”

“If I were Hannibal,” Will says, sitting up and stretching his legs out in front of him, “what would you ask me?”

“Probably for forgiveness,” she says. “There’s not much else I could ask for, is there? I really fucked up.”

Two years, wasted echoes through his head again. If Lecter had answered her call, and been free to leave, he likely would have found a way to make use of the catastrophe, though. He couldn’t have planned Will taking Abigail to Minnesota and blacking out just as he arrived (though, of course, he had ways to enhance that black out, fudge the timeline just a little), which means his goals were not rigid. That matches everything else Will knows about him. He is where complete self-control collides with whimsy and adaptation. Miriam dying stops him from using her mind, but that leaves her body; the method of her death will make it distinct from a Ripper kill, but it can only *be* a Ripper kill, given everything that’s gone before.

Will looks at the expanse of windowpane check across his legs, feels the cinch of the waistcoat across his stomach. He closes his eyes.

He sees, unfolding fluidly before him, a tableau, and walks it back to its origin. Sees not Hannibal Lecter but Abigail Hobbs wielding the knife. There will have to be certain adjustments.

Best to lean into them. A feature, not a flaw. The bullet that could never have exonerated Will, used for a second purpose.

“I need you to dress her,” he says, “like a deer. Bleed her out. Skin her.” He thinks back to the autopsies he’s been at; very few have needed to pull back the skin in any great amount, aside

from the ghoulish necessity of detaching the top of the face when opening the vault of the skull. “It will be harder than a deer, closer to a pig. Closer to peeling; you won’t be able to get a good grip to pull the fascia up. But it’s doable. Then joint her, carefully, as clean as you can make it. How are you at butchery?”

“Pretty good,” Abigail says. Her voice is shaking. “Will, how-”

“You’re going to break her down into the prettiest cuts you can manage. Is there a bandsaw where you are?”

“No.”

“Bone saw? Hack saw?”

“Maybe, but I don’t know where.”

He tongues at his upper lip, thoughtful.

“There’s a heavy cleaver,” Abigail says after a minute. “If I can find a mallet, I can probably get through most bone.”

It won’t be the cleanest. The Ripper would do it cleanly. Will thinks of the gleaming tools spread out in the basement, ready and waiting to tackle this exact kind of project.

Unavailable. The Ripper adapts. Sets a scene, plays to the moment; nothing excess is included.

Jack will hate if he can’t find all of Miriam Lass even now.

“Don’t worry about the bones; just focus on cutting steaks. You don’t need to do the whole body, so focus on the cuts you’re most confident in. Loin should be straightforward, uh… most of the gluteal muscles should separate nicely.”

“Jesus, Will. How do you know all of this?”

“Forensics degree,” he reminds her, almost fond. “And a lot of time in dark places. He had me convinced I was him, for a little while. Lent me his mindset.”

“So you know, then?” Abigail asks. Her voice sounds small. “About-”

“About the meat? Yeah, figured that out about five minutes into watching him cook, given the rest of what I know.” She’d known, of course. She’d probably tasted it first thing at his table, one of the only people alive who could have. And she hadn’t said anything, because how could she have? Will wonders if she was relieved. It would’ve been familiar, after all. “Can you do it?”

“Yeah. Yeah, definitely.” She can’t entirely hide her pride. He knows what she is, and she enjoys being seen. Who doesn’t?

“Good. Have you seen any fly fishing lures?” he asks, eyes moving rapidly behind their lids. “Does he work on them where you are?” It’s a small chance; if he has one other property, he might have ten, and the more he silos information-

(*silos information?* What a weird phrase, but it feels familiar, isn’t that somewhat military, or maybe intelligence-*)*

“Yeah,” Abigail says. “I- we’ve made some together. He said the kit we’re using was from you.”

Will’s jaw clenches, but no matter how much he wants to, he doesn’t say *oh, that absolute motherfucker*. Instead, he says, “Yeah. I’m- glad it got to you.” *Glad he stole it out of my house* . He swallows. He says, “After you’re done with the body, I need you to go get them. Look for ones that include human remains. Bone shards. Teeth. Hair. It’ll be small things, mostly, but obvious once you’re looking for them.”

Far more obvious than he would’ve been, if he’d actually done it. But then again, the encephalitis made him sloppy on a number of fronts, and Hannibal (*Lecter*, he reminds himself, but it’s hard when he’s sharing space with the Ripper inside his head) couldn’t risk the FBI missing it.

“You’re going to use those ones, specifically - *only* the ones that you’re sure have human remains - and you’re going to use them to pin labels to each cut of meat.”

“I can’t fake his handwriting,” Abigail says.

Will smiles. “I don’t want you to,” he says, but oh, wouldn’t that be nice? Hannibal’s handwriting is incredibly distinctive. It would lead right back to him.

Will can’t allow that, though.

“Did he teach you any calligraphy?”

“Yeah.”

(Of course he did.)

“That’s perfect. The FBI won’t have any way to connect the labels to him *or* you. Label each cut, pin it to the meat with the lure, find a nice butcher at least a half hour from where you are, farther if you can.” He wishes he knew what butcher Hannibal used for his pigs and ducks. Oh well. “You have a car?”

“I’m not supposed to take it.”

“Desperate times, Abigail. *Can* you take it?”

“Yeah, I know where he hid the key.”

“Perfect. Lay everything out in the case. Butchers don’t start their day as early as bakers, but you’ll have to move fast if it’s tonight; better to handle it tomorrow night. That will give you

time to do it right." He thinks back over the details. It's a little blunt for the Ripper, but he can't control for Abigail's skillset, only lean into it. "Make sure the display is on ice. Do you know how to braid hair?"

"I grew up in the Midwest, what do you think?"

"Right, silly question. Did he keep Miriam's hair long?"

"Yeah."

Will wonders if the fancy Italian hair products downstairs were for her as much as Hannibal. They have similar hair textures, if he's remembering her file right.

"Look up some Victorian mourning hair artwork." Hannibal would likely have created one of the more intricate pieces, a botanical scene or something, but a simple knot will serve just as well. "Place that in the center of the arrangement, along with the defleshed femurs. A memento mori - it will suggest that time ran out." That Jack wasn't fast enough, that the Ripper got sick of waiting while Jack dithered over Will's guilt or innocence.

It's enough of a whimsical touch, Will thinks.

He can picture the display perfectly. Finely butchered steaks, arranged carefully, a blaring sign that says *The Chesapeake Ripper is a cannibal.* Hannibal will hate it, will feel exposed. Jack will feel like an idiot, for missing it for so long, but it won't actually get him any closer to Hannibal in particular. And while a part of Will hates that he can't lead the FBI right to Hannibal's door, another part is deeply satisfied. *He* gets to reveal the Ripper's secrets, and *he* will maintain the Ripper's safety. It feels like power.

It feels like ownership.

Moreover, it will exonerate *Will* of the crimes he did not commit, will clarify the record at least that much.

All in all, it's a tidy little package. And Will is deep enough in Hannibal's brain that he feels no shame in it.

(Is he, though? Or maybe he's just past shame altogether, now that it doesn't matter one bit. He is good at what he does, always has been.)

"Can you manage all of that?" he asks, when he realizes the line's been quiet for a long, long time.

"Yeah," Abigail says. "Yeah, I mean- probably, yeah. Is this going to get him into trouble, though?"

He feels a little flare of anger at that. *It's none of your business*, he wants to say. Instead, he says, "No. I can't risk that. You can trust me."

Silence, except for the sounds of Abigail breathing, of her shifting.

“It’s complicated,” he adds, and starts unbuttoning his- Hannibal’s- *Lecter’s* - suit jacket. He needs to be himself again. The work is done.

“No kidding,” she says. “Look, are- are you safe?”

Will laughs as he shrugs out of the jacket and tosses it to the side. Starts on the waistcoat. “Safe as can be. The house is under 24/7 FBI surveillance and he’s under armed escort whenever Jack lets him out to play.”

Abigail doesn’t say anything in response, no doubt unnerved by it. Scared. Worried Jack will find her, take her away.

“We’re being very good,” Will says, unable to keep the dark humor out of his voice.

“*Why*?” she asks. “The surveillance, I mean.”

“Because officially, after I butchered my way out of jail, I disappeared. The FBI assumes I’m armed and dangerous. That I’ll show up one of these days to get my revenge on the man I loudly proclaimed had set me up.”

“Who *did* set you up.”

“Barely matters now.” He tosses the waistcoat aside, decides to wait on the rest out of an exhausted sense of propriety. “But before the manhunt started, I found myself on his doorstep and he… took me in.”

She doesn’t need to know the details.

“He does that,” Abigail says. “Always there to help if it lets him get a little more control over you.”

“Don’t I know it,” Will says. Chews his lip. Asks, finally, “Are *you* okay? I thought…”

“I’m fine,” she says. “Taking online courses. I’ll be applying to college again soon, he’s got a new identity lined up for me and everything.”

He frowns. “That’s it? That was the plan? Use you to get me locked up, wait long enough to get some paperwork done, then let you go?”

“Not exactly. I- he should probably tell you. Look, I think I need to go. And handle this.”

Will nods, doesn’t lift his head again. “Yeah, of course, I- I probably won’t be able to get ahold of this phone again. Can you- take care of yourself, okay?”

He was never actually her father, doesn’t know how to be, but whatever kinship he felt with her before, it’s doubled now. Trebled. Here they both are, in the belly of the beast, the living dead. And beneath all the composure he’s clinging to, beneath Lecter’s suit and his own desperate clutch for some semblance of control, he can feel the rage coming back. The hurt.

The fury at what’s been taken from him.

She doesn't need to hear any of that right now.

"Yeah," Abigail says, and Will wonders how long has passed. "You, uh, you too."

His lips twitch toward either a scream or a smile. "You got it. Goodbye, Abigail."

"Bye, Will."

The line goes dead.

He doesn't sleep.

It's not that he isn't exhausted - he is. Dissociating, even just to sit and sulk in the basement before coming up to argue with Hannibal Lecter, isn't exactly restful. Talking with a girl he thought he'd *killed*, and then revised to just *murdered by Hannibal Lecter*, isn't restful either. But for all the bone-deep weariness, his mind won't stop racing over everything, and he's not ready to let down his guard surrounded by all the skins Lecter dons at will.

He does lay off the brandy, though. Has enough self-possession to know that won't help. He's alone in his head for now, but any blurring of the lines…

Too risky. His other self wants out to play, and is mad for all the wrong reasons.

When Lecter returns, Will wagers it's around dawn. He's put the burner phone back in its hatbox, so he can't be sure, but he's got that particular ache in the connective tissue of his ribs that he always gets around five A.M. on an allnighter. He hears the front door open from where he is, though it's less a noise than a shift in the air, dimly perceptible through the gap separating him from the bedroom. Footsteps on the stairs are only slightly more noticeable. But then there's a knock on the door.

"Are you awake?" Lecter asks, and he sounds so normal, so *unexhausted*, that Will thinks he could probably strangle him before the conditioning kicks in. It's only reasonable.

"Yeah," he says, and shoves himself to his feet. He's left Lecter's suit and shirt crumpled on the floor and is back in a dead woman's clothing. He half-stumbles on his way to the closet door, his legs a little numb from zoning out in one pose for too long.

Lecter opens the door and takes in the scene, hands stilling where they've already begun loosening his tie. "Playing dress up?"

"What time is it?" he says, peering out just far enough to ascertain that, yes, it's at least dawn, and that Lecter's bedroom looks even more ostentatious from this angle.

"Just after six. Shift change is in ten minutes, apparently. I've been warned to be even more alert than usual - a good opportunity to escort you down under the auspices of patrolling my own home before I try to get some sleep."

His gaze searches Will, then goes to the crumpled clothing on the floor of his closet. "Ten minutes should give you more than enough time to rehang the suit you borrowed."

Something in Will breaks.

It's too much. The domestic surreality of it, the intimacy of it, the gentle prodding of it, and Will *cannot* let Lecter know how furious he is about Abigail, can't act on it, has to play the good houseguest, not a hostage at all, as Lecter is so painstakingly careful around him. He hasn't pushed, not really, not the way Will *knows* he's capable of. Instead, he's been so perfectly, pleasantly reasonable, and Will has spent the whole night locked in his *fucking closet* and-

Lecter's head connects with the doorframe before Will even knows they're moving.

For half a second, Will thinks he isn't in control of himself anymore, but oh, he *is* . He feels every inch of his body, and it hums with a focused fury, rising in pitch as Lecter staggers, stunned. There's a steady, confident narration in the back of his head as Will moves. *I pull the tie from his collar and loop it around his neck as a garrote. Before he can regain equilibrium, I begin to choke off his air* . The silk is cool against his knuckles, against his red-hot blood, and Lecter's face purples just like anybody else's.

Of course, Lecter is a practiced predator, and he regains coherence rapidly. He snarls, reaching for Will, and then they're on the ground again, the tie slipping free. Both get a hand on it, and the narration blends into each movement Will makes. He is calculated fury and precision as he hooks a leg around Lecter's and destabilizes the joint, as he is slammed into the carpeted floor, as they roll into the wall of suits. Just like the previous morning, Will can feel his other self waking up.

This time, though, he doesn't fight it. No, he says *hello* in the dark corners of his mind. He focuses on what's in front of him, and his other self doesn't move to stop him.

After all, Will isn't trying to *kill* Hannibal Lecter. Not this time.

He loosens the tension on the tie and throws himself to the side, but Lecter loops the tie around his fist and draws him closer once more. Will could let go of the tie and create more space between them, but he's not ready to give it up, so he lashes out again. Lecter absorbs a knee to the abdomen with barely a grunt, then bears down on him, manages to get behind him, get an arm around his chest.

Something sharp pricks against his throat.

"Stop," Lecter says, and Will only laughs and pushes forward. The scalpel (because that's what it is, Will can finally see) retreats.

Lecter doesn't actually want to hurt him, and that makes him weak.

The ease with which Will disarms him backs that up, proves that Lecter knows it too, but not wanting to seriously hurt Will doesn't mean he stops fighting back. Neither lets go of the tie, no matter how tangled it becomes, and they roll together back into the middle of the closet. They are trapped with each other, two beasts entangled so deeply that neither can survive the other's destruction. And then Will gets the fabric around his neck, and Lecter snarls and bites

down at the column of Will's throat in retaliation, right over where the scalpel had nicked him.

Will doesn't falter. Doesn't rear back, doesn't strike out, just sets the knot and *hauls* . Lecter's teeth leave his flesh and then the back of his hand connects with Will's cheek, knuckles hard and shocking.

Will hears himself laughing even as he loses his grip on the silk. Even as he watches Lecter stagger up, move for the door.

"Oh no you don't," he pants, and launches himself back onto his feet. The closet door closes under their combined weight, and Will presses up hard along Lecter's back, the fabric of his suit jacket not quite blocking the heat of their bodies. He grabs for Lecter's hands. The shirt cuffs block his fingers for a moment, but he jerks his hips and the curve of one shoulder into Lecter when the other man tries to unseat him.

It's a near thing, the tie almost too short, but then the knot cinches and Lecter is trapped, wrists bound behind him and to his throat so that if he moves, he will choke. And Will grabs onto the length of silk between them and uses it to tumble Lecter to the floor. He lands face up, and Will descends, straddles his lap, his entire weight pinning the other man's legs hard, one hand closing again around the makeshift leash to haul Lecter's head back, the other tangling into the front of his shirt.

There's a startling, frustrating lack of blood, and Will's fingers itch. He wants a knife, but Lecter's scalpel is too far away to reach. He has only his fists, and his nails are too blunt to tear flesh. But the thought appeals, the sheer animal hunger of it, and he claws his hand deeper into Lecter's chest.

"Will," the other man gasps. "Which one of you is- present- in this moment?" His voice is broken, choked off, and Will delights in snapping the tie back once more, so that Lecter thrashes, reflexively.

"Just me," Will murmurs. "The real deal." His other self still simmers beneath his skin, but Will is anchored by the look in Lecter's eyes. There's no fear there, and no pride, only a mirror image of his own delight.

"And what- do you want of me?" Lecter rasps.

Will *wants* the fear. Doesn't he? Why is he satisfied in the absence of it? "I want," he says, enunciating every word carefully, feeling them out for their truth as he goes, "to stop pretending any of this is alright." He wants for them to tear each other apart, he wants *true honesty* , not just words but actions.

"You wanted that yesterday, but you pulled your punches," Lecter gasps. "You were calm when I left you. What changed?"

Abigail, of course.

He can't know I talked to Abigail, the quiet, steady part of his mind whispers. *He can't know about Miriam Lass. He'll stop what I've set in motion, he'll take back control, and I can't let him do it, not again*.

"What was it like tonight, to be Will Graham?" he whispers instead.

Because they swapped roles for a night, didn't they? What a change indeed. And when he thinks about it, really thinks about it - Lecter out in the world, nominally free, trying to defend Will but also stealing his life, stealing the opportunity to see Lounds's corpse directly-

Yeah. Will can be angry about that, too.

Lecter's lips twitch. Against his thigh, Will feels Lecter's cock twitch, too. They're both hard, he realizes, but there's no horror there this time. It just feels right. Accurate.

"It felt exquisite," Lecter murmurs. "As always."

Will shivers.

Hannibal leans in, pupils dilated, even as it chokes his air more, as it fractures his voice when he adds, "But I did miss you."

Mine , Will thinks, gazing down into Hannibal's upturned face, the whites of his eyes growing bloodshot. This is what the other him has had, all this time. This purity of feeling. This aching, curling *want* .

This man, in all his beautiful ugliness.

Mine .

And in the next instant, the force of that possessive *need* breaks through the sticky hot haze of violence, and Will shoves himself off Hannibal's lap. Falls back onto his ass, staring at the other man, feeling like he's been doused with a bucket of frigid water. That isn't his thought. Can't be his thought. He's- he's somehow managed to end up in a mixed state with the feral thing inside his skull, and he wasn't in control at all.

(No, he was. He *was*. He felt all those things, and they all felt good and right and-)

"Fuck," he whispers, because he attacked the Chesapeake Ripper, abused his clothing, and then didn't manage to kill him, and his limbs are trembling so much that he knows he doesn't have a chance of defending himself. "Fuck, I'm sorry, I don't…"

Know what happened? But he does. He hasn't lost time. He was there for all of it.

"I don't know what came over me," he settles on, and hazards a glance at Hannibal.

Thankfully, Hannibal - *Lecter*, he reminds himself, and knows those walls won't be able to stay up much longer - continues to look less murderous and more fascinated. Slowly, never looking away from Will, he arches his back and lifts his arms enough to reduce the tension on the tie, and in another moment he's got one of the knots free. The rest slither after, and he

straightens, sliding the silk between his fingers. At last, his gaze drops down, as he inspects the fabric for damage. His throat is livid red. He is breathing evenly, but only though force of will.

“Thank you,” Lecter says, finally, and his voice is ragged, “for remembering to spare my face. Though I suspect our ten minutes are up.”

And Will, exhausted, unable to come up with a clever response, or a response of any kind, lets himself fall back onto the floor.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

“Have I missed my chance at getting down to a bed?” Will asks.

Lecter pulls open the closet door (which, Will can tell now, he always meant to close; he was ensuring their privacy for their little spat, not trying to escape). “They should have had enough time after shift change to settle in and grow a little more complacent. Give me a moment to close the curtains, and then I suspect it should be no more difficult than before.”

“Won’t you get in trouble for that?”

“I’ll argue my right to sleep. I can be pointedly petulant when need be.”

*“Oh, **can** you,” he says, and if he wasn’t so tired and embarrassed, he’d have laughed.*

--

Will figures out who killed Freddie Lounds. Hannibal makes breakfast. Will winds up crying on the floor of the pantry. Just a normal morning!

(@chaotic_plotter remains incredible, and has also posted their first Hannibal fic! Go check it out!)

“So, Freddie Lounds.”

Will doesn’t know how long he’s been lying there, staring up at the ceiling of the closet. Long enough that they’ve both caught their breaths, and his erection has, thankfully, completely disappeared. Long enough that all the blows Lecter landed on him are starting to really hurt. Not long enough for Lecter to haul him down to the basement bodily, or just to go off to bed.

Not long enough for Will to feel at all steady in himself, but what’s new?

“Miss Lounds is undeniably dead,” Lecter confirms. He’s on his feet, and Will listens to him fussing with his clothing. A hanger jostles on the rack. “Shall we discuss your outburst, now that you’ve caught your breath?”

“No,” Will says. Adds nothing else, and waits for Lecter to push.

He doesn’t.

“Tell me how she died,” Will insists after another thirty seconds of rustling fabric, because it’s something normal, talking about somebody else’s no doubt gruesome death. He needs normal, now. He needs to know he’s himself.

Lecter considers. Will rolls onto his side, away from the other man, when he hears buttons being undone. “Your admirer is gaining confidence. No bullet to the heart for Miss Lounds, which does double duty implicating you more than our bailiff murderer. He strangled her, then carved her tongue from her mouth - not the whole muscle, just the obvious part - and sliced a fringe into it the better to rest upon her keyboard. Spelled out libel, which took a little work on the double L.”

“Creative,” Will mutters. “A little basic, though, if it were me. Did you point that out to Jack?”

He should feel sick, theorizing about his own murderous aesthetic, just as he did when hearing about what his body had done to Frederick Chilton. But if this long hell of a night has proven anything, it’s how far beyond that he’s ended up.

“I did not. I wanted to discuss our options first.” More rustling. Will wonders if that was his shirt or his slacks, then decides not to think about it. Doesn’t matter.

“*Our* options,” he says instead, voice dripping with bitterness.

“We might gain an advantage if we encourage Jack to believe this is you at large. Denying him means you are still an unknown bogeyman, lurking in the shadows, and we both know how active Jack’s imagination can be.”

Will thinks of Miriam Lass’s severed arm. The phone calls in the night. He frowns and rubs at his temple. “We need to know who my admirer is first, before we can safely make that decision,” he says. “Did Jack ever get anywhere on that?”

“No, but it hasn’t been very long.”

Hasn’t it? But then again, despite his best efforts and his searing rage, he’d lost track of days in the BSHCI, and only his lawyer had really kept him oriented. And now, here, in Lecter’s house? He tries to count back. Yesterday he had lost control of himself over the smashed coffee cup, then dissociated for the rest of the day. The day before, he’d learned the little sordid secrets between them. Jack and Alana had come by. He’d eaten a delicious sandwich. And the day before that…

Huh. It’s really only been three days. And his best guess of the span of time between when the mistrial had been called and now is a week. Tops.

“I guess not,” Will concedes. He chews at his lip, squinting up at where the closet’s crown molding (whose closet has *crown molding* in it?) comes together in the far corner. His quick calendar exercise has him back in the mindset of the BSHCI, just a little. Curled up on his cot, staring into nothing. He can almost hear the murmuring of the other inmates. Hear the footsteps as somebody approaches.

Feel eyes on the back of his neck.

The orderly. The one who always watched him with a pointed eagerness. The one who tried to talk once or twice, who instead of disgust radiated interest, acceptance. Will had ignored him, because what that orderly had seen hadn't been *him*, it had been the Copycat. It had been Will Graham, murderer.

But somebody who saw and idolized Will Graham, murderer, might very well have wanted him exonerated. Might very well be exhilarated by his newly earned freedom.

(He might also, Will has to admit, have wanted to keep Will all to himself, trapped in a basement. But in both cases, Will suspects it is his future capacity for violence that is important to both his admirers more than possession *per se*.)

"Matthew Brown," he says, finally pushing himself up off the floor. Fuck, but every inch of him hurts. His hands are raw from holding onto the tie so tightly. "He's our killer. An orderly from the BSHCI. He wanted my freedom, and now wants my attention. Likely also my… appreciation."

"And so would not have taken kindly to Ms. Lounds' mudslinging, nor her behavior at trial," Lecter concludes, and he has that pleased note to his voice again, that pride. It's familiar, a particular tone he'd use during their informal sessions when Will had stumbled onto a breakthrough in front of him, but it has a little added something now.

Lecter had always given their unofficial therapeutic relationship a light air of collusion, but this is downright conspiratorial.

Mine, comes the pleased, dark whisper. He shuts it away and turns to face Lecter, who is, in fact, stripped down to just his dress shirt and briefs. Will wonders at it until he sees the collar is torn.

Destined for the trashcan, then, and can be left in place as some peace offering for Will's frayed sense of propriety.

"Have I missed my chance at getting down to a bed?" Will asks, averting his gaze all the same.

Lecter pulls open the closet door (which, Will can tell now, he always meant to close; he was ensuring their privacy for their little spat, not trying to escape). "They should have had enough time after shift change to settle in and grow a little more complacent. Give me a moment to close the curtains, and then I suspect it should be no more difficult than before."

"Won't you get in trouble for that?"

"I'll argue my right to sleep. I can be pointedly petulant when need be."

"Oh, *can* you," he says, and if he wasn't so tired and embarrassed, he'd have laughed.

Lecter exits the closet, and Will listens as he moves about the room. He marks drawers closing. Curtains being dragged into place. Before Lecter can invite him into his grandiose

bedchamber, Will peeks his head out and, seeing all the windows are firmly obscured, lets himself free.

Lecter has on the same sleep pants he'd worn earlier in the night, with the addition of a high-necked sweater to conceal the bruises forming there, as well as the plush robe Will remembers from the morning he'd come here spooked by his sleepwalking. It feels like a lifetime ago.

After just a moment of mutual regard, Will makes for the hallway. Lecter moves past him to lead the way. "Your Matthew Brown. Should we use him, do you think?" Lecter asks as he takes a few confident steps into the hall then beckons. "Or will he be too volatile, signal to Jack too quickly that his pathology is markedly different from your own?"

"My *hypothetical* pathology," Will mutters, but without the heat that he'd normally put into it, as he finds himself frowning at the suit of full samurai armor positioned at the entrance to the bedroom. Not what he would've expected. Absolutely not what he would've picked.

"Jack's understanding of your hypothetical pathology," Lecter agrees, a laugh in his tone, and he isn't very far away; he must have noticed Will's pause. Will looks over at him. "My aunt's," Lecter explains. "My own pathology doesn't keep me from sentiment, you know."

"Oh, I know," Will says, and sighs. "You're all sentiment right up until the moment you're not." A good liar, but particularly skilled because he doesn't *need* to lie; he feels deeply until it is inconvenient, and then he is able to unstick himself better than Will can ever manage.

Mine, his traitorous subconscious urges.

Will regards the armor a moment longer, then finally enters the hallway. He stays a few steps behind Lecter, letting the other man use his better knowledge of the house layout to check sight-lines. They move largely unimpeded. "Jack's understanding," Will says as they reach the top of the stairs, "comes with a heavy dose of bias at the moment. He *wants* this to be me, just like he wanted Silvestri's victims to be the R- to be yours."

"To his credit," Lecter muses, "some of them were."

"Yeah, the victim who was light a few feet of small intestine never did quite fit," Will mutters.

Lecter looks back with a gleam in his eye.

"At any rate," Will pushes on, "I don't actually have a sense of how stable Matthew Brown will be. He'll escalate, more rapidly than most, that much Lounds's death has already proved, but so far all his elaborations are in our favor."

He hesitates then. *Our* favor. Great, now he's teaming them together too.

"But if he gets no response from me," he continues, "which, of course, he can't, I wouldn't be surprised if he… acts out."

"Tries to get your attention again."

“And *that* might strike Jack as not like me.”

“Very likely, but-” and then Lecter goes silent, head canting slightly as if to pick up a faint sound. His whole body has gone taut. Not stiff or rigid, but alert, primed for motion. It’s the transformation itself that keeps Will from asking what the matter is, too caught up in seeing Lecter as the predator he is to be curious about anything else.

He hadn’t gotten a chance to notice the change before, in the closet; he’d been far too close, too in the heat of it himself.

But he’s not far behind now, either. That animal alertness spreads into Will’s bones next, and he slowly shifts until he is pressed against the wall. He’s had his eyes on the various windows, but he double checks once again that he isn’t visible through any of them. Then, as naturally as breathing, he checks his shadow. Sees it peeking just a little out onto the floor and goes back up a step, dropping to a crouch.

Just like that, *our favor* feels so incredibly accurate and *right*. He breathes the same air Hannibal does, seeks out the same threat, and if one of Jack’s men were to step in front of him at that very moment, he would lunge.

But nobody steps out. The moment passes. Hannibal’s body language relaxes, minutely, and he glances back to Will. Their eyes meet.

Will shivers and makes himself stand back up. “All clear?” he asks, and his voice is rough.

“All clear,” Hannibal - *Lecter* - confirms.

They are silent, however, as they make their way to the kitchen. Matthew Brown can wait. There aren’t many windows this deep inside the house, but those that exist are much more exposing. No room for banter, no room for plotting, only a careful dance to keep Will out of sight.

Will straightens once he reaches the relative safety of the pantry, turning back to look at Lecter, who has gone to the fridge. Will is just about to ask if he’s changed his mind about getting some sleep, then realizes what he’s doing: providing an excuse for having come back down from his bedroom.

He’s going to make breakfast.

They’re both aching and exhausted. He must want to collapse into bed as dearly as Will does. In his pajamas, he looks soft. Vulnerable, almost. It’s an odd contrast to his usual demeanor as he sets an egg carton onto the island behind him, along with a package of what looks like sausage meat and a block of cheese.

“You’re not making anything fancy, right?” Will asks as a jar of what looks like home-canned jam makes an appearance.

“Breakfast sandwiches, consisting of a cheddar and chive biscuit, egg, sausage, and a touch of marionberry jam,” Lecter replies. He gathers a few more ingredients, then moves to the

other side of the kitchen island so that he can look up at Will without it being odd. He still keeps it to a bare flicker.

Will frowns. "Seems excessive. Just hardboil me an egg or send me to bed without. I did just make your morning a lot more difficult."

"It's not for you." Lecter pauses, then glances up at him, catching his gaze. "Or not only for you, I suppose."

It takes a moment for it to click. "You're making breakfast for the security detail?"

"Yes. It will reinforce the idea that nothing strange happened this morning."

It shouldn't be surprising; Lecter is always the consummate host. But he *is* dragging. There's a slight rounding to his shoulders that hints at the pain he must be in. There's also a tightening around his lips.

He's not just worn down. He's angry. Not at Will, though; at the necessity of what he's doing.

The realization makes Will soften a little. "I wouldn't have thought you'd ever get tired of putting on a show," Will murmurs, wanting to lean against the doorway but knowing that puts him too near the sightline through the little window to his right.

"Putting on a show is one thing. Being constrained in the privacy of my own home not at my own choice is… something else."

"You hate it."

"Of course. You would too." He turns away to retrieve a container of flour as well as another small fleet of ingredients and a mixing bowl.

"I made it worse."

Lecter works his jaw. "If we had been able to move during the shift change, I wouldn't have felt the need," he agrees, after a moment. Then makes for the dining room, no doubt to get the chives. "But as it is, you should go downstairs and let me handle this, until we know for sure that there won't be an impromptu search of the house."

"They would've knocked by now, I think." Will's gaze drifts to the sliver of french door he can see from his shadowed haunt in the pantry. The shades, thankfully, remain down. It would have been impossible to get from the hall door to the pantry unseen otherwise.

Then he looks at the kitchen island. Remembers with upsetting clarity how his breath had fogged on it in his dream. Will shifts uncomfortably, and reconsiders going downstairs after all.

"Unfortunately," Lecter says from the other room, "they raised the possibility of random sweeps when I went out last night. When I asked why, they gave no reason; I'm hoping providing breakfast will allay any suspicions or personal frustrations with me that might have led to that decision."

Will frowns. He doesn't like the sound of that.

Lecter returns and sets about weighing (with a very minimalist kitchen scale) ingredients for the biscuits. "Sure would've been a lot simpler if I'd gotten here sooner," Will says, desperate to fill the silence. "The first day."

Lecter looks up, and tilts his head in question.

"You might've been able to get me to wherever you've stashed Miriam Lass," Will explains, then wants to swear, because this is only a small improvement over thinking about his wet dream. *Miriam Lass* is being butchered by *Abigail Hobbs* and Lecter can't know that Will's been thinking about either of them.

But Lecter's looking at him thoughtfully, now, paused in the process of shredding the cheese.

"What?" Will asks, hoping he doesn't look as furtive as he feels.

"It certainly would've been an improvement, you're right. The property is in no way connected to me; Jack wouldn't have found you there."

Will nods. "Yeah," he says, and stops himself from adding something idiotic like *and I could've helped with Miriam's dosage schedule* . Instead, he thinks, like a mantra, *I don't know Abigail is alive. I don't know* -

"You would have had time to catch up with Abigail, as well."

Fuck.

Will's eyes go wide, and he almost runs (where? *where*?), but then he realizes that it's absurd that Lecter could know about the call. Much more likely that this is another instance of Lecter's new insistence on radical honesty. And if he doesn't think that Will already knows Abigail is alive, then Will had better start acting shocked and *angry* real fast.

But anger isn't coming. It all bled out of him in the closet. The universe continues to laugh at him: he'd been able to hurt Lecter but not able to express the real *why* of his rage, and now he's able to respond to that *why* openly but he's just-

Confused.

"Abigail?" he rasps.

He's crumpled on the floor before he realizes that of course the anger had been papering over a much deeper injury. He fights to keep his breathing even, but his lungs seize, and he curls up, pressing his forehead to his knees. "You mother *fucker*," Will manages, but if there's a response, he can't hear it.

He's too busy seeing the highlights reel that he figured out during the call: Lecter following him to Minnesota, comforting a terrified Abigail, convincing her to fake her own death so- so *what*, so Will could suffer just long enough that he'd be ready to cast off the whole world for revenge? So Lecter could see his darkness unfurl?

Was he always going to give her back, in the end?

“Tell me you’re lying,” he hisses, even though he knows he isn’t. Even though he can hear Abigail’s panicked breathing in his ears still (or maybe it’s his, but it all runs together, doesn’t it?), even though he knows what she’s doing right this minute.

“Will.”

A warm, broad hand settles on his shoulder. Will flinches, but it doesn’t retreat. Lecter’s fingers close tighter, if anything, and Will turns enough to stare at them. There’s flour along his cuticles.

Will’s eyes burn.

“Tell me you’re lying,” he repeats again. *Lie to me now* . Maybe then he can be angry again. Maybe then he won’t feel so fucking raw, curled up in the doorway to the pantry. Maybe then he’ll have words to articulate all of what he’s feeling.

“Abigail is alive and well,” Lecter says instead, refusing the comfort of fury. “She had to appear to die for her own safety.”

“And my destruction was just a bonus?” he spits, then presses his face hard against his knees again. He can’t keep still. Shudders rip down along his spine, shake his bones. He can feel the first brash burn of tears forcing their way out into the air.

“The beginning of your becoming who you are, Will,” Lecter murmurs. “The way each of us was, before, we could never have slotted together. Never have been the fathers she needed, and she could never have been safe.”

“Don’t,” Will says, spasming, trying to shake Lecter off, and this time the other man does let go. “ *Don’t* pretend that this is all for us. It’s not. It’s for *you*, and we’re only along for the ride.”

Lecter hums, then shifts from where he’s crouched to sitting just beside him, their shoulders almost brushing. Will can feel the heat of him. “Tell me what you’re feeling right now.”

Betrayed. Angry. Devastated. Relieved. Oh, god, the relief is the hardest to grasp, because it makes him feel guilty. So *guilty* . But Abigail is alive. So is he. He’s not in the BSHCI anymore, and he’s safe in the home of a man who would fracture him to reassemble the pieces into a different configuration, one that might- what?

Hate himself a little less? *Fear* himself a little less?

“I don’t know what *to* feel,” he says, then huffs a sharp and bitter laugh. “Everything that’s happened is so far out of the realm of *realistic* and yet it’s happened. It’s done. It’s not going to change if I kick and scream, so why bother?”

Why bother fighting any of it, really?

“Because emotions are not rational,” Lecter murmurs. “And never can be.”

Will lifts his head at that. Stares at him. Lecter is wholly focused on him, brow drawn just slightly with concern, eyes burning into him. He is so close that Will can make out flecks of red in his irises, can see the faint growth of stubble along his jaw. Overwhelmed, Will jerks his head away and looks out at the kitchen, at the bowls and ingredients in disarray, abandoned because… because he's crying on Lecter's pantry floor.

Not rational at all.

"You could have just turned me in," he says to the room at large. The space thrums with the memory of Lecter, of how many hours have been spent in this room, in this *house* , meticulously crafting this life. "Or killed me. I would have pulled the trigger if- if I didn't have this *block*. You had every opportunity to disarm me, disable me, whatever you chose." Slowly, Will looks back at Lecter - no, *Hannibal*, he can't keep maintaining this fiction of distance. He looks back at Hannibal and shivers at the open, eager hunger he sees in those eyes now.

No walls between them. Just breathless anticipation.

"And instead you've given up comfort," Will says, voice barely a whisper. "Given up your independence."

Hannibal's head cants, just a faint movement, but it is warm. Encouraging.

Will is drowning beneath the weight of that regard. It shouldn't be there. And if it has to be there, it should feel smothering, terrible, not intoxicating.

Mine, his darkness whispers, and for the first time, Will wonders if Hannibal's is whispering it back.

"Those things," he starts, to fill the silence, unable to keep himself from tilting towards answers. "Those things are deeply important to you. You wouldn't give them up easily. So why did you do it? For what? For- for *me*? Why?"

Hannibal is silent and still for a long time, and then he reaches out, slowly, giving Will the option to flinch away. He doesn't. Hannibal's hand comes to rest against his neck, slides to cup the back of his skull.

Will isn't sure he's breathing.

"Because I could never entirely predict you," Hannibal murmurs. It has all the weight of a confession. "You are staggeringly unique, and capable of more beauty than any person I have ever met. And because even now, I'm not sure I could survive our separation. I want you to see all of me, even if it means you hate me more." Hannibal's voice sounds thick with emotion, but that can't be right. *A lie, it's a lie*, Will thinks, because if Hannibal is in this very moment feeling even a *fraction* of what Will is, then Will doesn't know what he'll do.

Hannibal's throat clicks as he swallows. "But I hope you won't hate me," he adds. "At least not for long."

Will feels like he's drowning. Sinking below the weight of everything, surrounded by a darkness cool and endless and comforting. He aches from it. For it. For all the honesty on offer, the space to spill out from his boundaries. His bruises throb and his blood sings.

He can't allow this. He can't know where this goes.

"I don't want any of this," Will whispers.

"And yet it's happening," Hannibal says. His fingers slide through Will's hair, pull him a little closer. Will uncurls, pressing his palms to the pantry floor, leaning in to Hannibal's gravity. "It would have happened without me, Will. It might have taken longer, but it also might have been much worse."

Will closes his eyes, shivers. But he fights, too. " *Worse*. Worse than… than losing every inch of my life?" he asks, and then he pulls away, rolls his head free of Hannibal's touch. He shoves his own hands back into his hair, tugs at the roots to try and ground himself. It doesn't help much. "Everything I thought I knew about myself is wrong. I've lost my home, my job, my *identity*." His throat tightens. "I've even lost my fucking dogs, Hannibal."

Silence.

Will opens his eyes, and finds Hannibal still looking back at him.

"Birth is trauma," Hannibal says, voice soft. Tender. "Unavoidably."

Will wants to approach, and so he makes himself retreat. Makes himself stand, at last, though his legs shake. Makes himself look away again, back out at the kitchen. "Was yours?" he asks, though, because he can't make himself disengage entirely.

Hannibal stands too. Regards his hands and does not reply.

Yes , Will thinks, *but you don't want to name it* .

"Go rest, Will," he says instead. "Sleep, and I will be there when you wake."

"And then?" Will asks.

"Would you like to talk to Abigail?"

Will chances one last look at Hannibal. At his now-tousled hair, at the weariness in his eyes. The kindness is not an act. Will can see that now. It never was an act. It was never just manipulation.

The maelstrom that crashes down on him whenever he looks into Hannibal's eyes only grows stronger for it.

"No," Will says after a moment. "No, not yet."

Hannibal nods, then gestures to the trap door. "Then we will talk about what comes next, I imagine. How best to bring about your freedom."

From Jack. From his own fractured mind.

From Hannibal?

Will nods, hauls up the door. “Sounds good,” he says. And then, testing out the shape of the words before he says them and finding he can’t decide between grimacing or ducking his head in embarrassment, he does both and murmurs, “Thank you.”

And then he puts himself away, back into Hell.

It burns a little more gently now.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

“Are you watching, Will?”

Will’s mouth goes dry.

“I can think of no way for you to indicate except, perhaps, for you to turn on the shower.” A pause as he quickly peels the ginger root he is now holding. “And I wonder if, having been asked, you’ll be so contrary as to not do it.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Will mutters, but he’s already reaching for the screen.

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Cooking with Hannibal! But first, one last interlude from the closet...

(As always, @chaotic_plotter is a gem among betas.)

Chapter Notes

Hello, dear readers!

The fic is now drafted (save for the epilogue, which is in process), and so I'm shifting to a twice-a-week posting schedule! New hotel murder basement shenanigans every Wednesday and Saturday until we're done. And, uh, buckle up, because starting Saturday... things kick in to overdrive for the boys.

Also, per the tags, I promised you all food porn, and here it is! The dishes referenced in this chapter are all real, delicious things I've been lucky enough to eat (except for the dumpling). The fancy back-of-the-restaurant Thai place Hannibal mentions is called Langbaan. Their menu changes around a lot, so I had to take a guess on exactly how the dumpling was put together, but both appetizers Hannibal describes? Fucking spectacular. The front-of-the-restaurant is PaaDee, and it was ridiculously hard to pick just one dish from their menu. If you're ever in the area, absolutely go to PaaDee, and if you've got the lead time, try to get a seat at Langbaan.

And if you want to see photos of my meal from Langbaan, you can always come check out my twitter at @serindrana.

This time, at least, Will knows he's dreaming.

The distinction is in many ways immaterial; Will has always dreamed vividly, nightmare or not, and has better recall than most due to how disruptive most of his dreams are. His dreams are not so much strange, fictional parts of his life as they are very real, very *true* experiences. So knowing that he is dreaming only means that he knows this is not physical reality. That he knows nobody else but him is experiencing what he sees now. What he feels.

He also knows that he has seen and felt these things before.

The crack of Hannibal's head into the doorframe. The slide of silk along his palms. The struggle of body against body, though this time, he feels the carnality of the moment as much as the violent exultation. He feels Hannibal's breath against his sweat-slick skin, their legs tangled together and straining for a moment's superiority. Hannibal's teeth graze his throat, and this time, he arches up into it, lets his head fall back.

He delights in the momentary bleedover from savagery into desire and then back again as he leashes his monster. Hannibal lets himself be maneuvered this time, and when Will forces him against the door, it's out of a pure desire to touch, to maneuver, to control. When Will bucks his hips, it's not to subdue, but to rut. He pants hot and wet into Hannibal's ear and grins, then hauls him down to the floor and settles into his lap.

Hannibal stares up at him, and does not ask who is present in this moment.

They both know it's only Will.

Panting, Will strokes his hand not holding the silk leash along the exposed column of Hannibal's neck, drinking in the fierce adoration of Hannibal's expression. His lips are parted, ready to be seized and bruised. His pupils are dilated. Will imagines his own are much the same.

There is something he is meant to remember right now. Something that is not how good this feels, how right. No; no, it *is* that, it's important that it is good and right, because- because-

You did this to me, and I hate it.

No. Incorrect, on both fronts.

You showed me myself is more accurate.

And *I love it* is the truth.

He has never felt more powerful than in this moment, and he has never felt more himself, and the realization flickers to life and then dies in another instant, leaving him empty, exhausted. He feels his skin grow tight and cold around him as he stares into Hannibal's eyes.

He did this to me, he tells himself.

And I hate it.

He snaps Hannibal's neck.

There is a moment of pure relief and pleasure, but then Hannibal's body falls limp below him, the brilliant light going out of his eyes and leaving only a husk in a rumpled suit. Will touches his face. Learns the contours of his cheeks, the give of his lower lip, and in the next moment discards it all as *inaccurate* . Worse, unattainable. Hannibal, dead, is nothing like Hannibal, alive, and now Will can never know-

What?

What it's like not to be alone?

A panic builds in Will's chest as he strokes the corpse's hair, feels the crunch of pomade between his fingers. Panic, and pain, and fury. Fury, that Hannibal did not stop him, that *he* didn't stop himself, because isn't he supposed to be incapable of this? Of all the people in the world, *this* is the man Will cannot kill.

You're dreaming, he reminds himself.

"You're dreaming," says his own voice from his own throat. But not, Will thinks, from where he sits right now.

Slowly, Will lifts his head and sees his reflection in Hannibal's dressing room mirror.

He sees himself only as he ever has been: tired, haunted, bitterly amused. There are no antlers on his brow, no darkness rising up around him. There is only him and, beneath him, the body of Hannibal Lecter.

He is wearing Hannibal's suit.

It's the charcoal suit with the red windowpane that he tried on just before Abigail's call. He doesn't know if he was wearing it when the dream began; it hardly matters, at any rate. But now, it looks ill-fitting on him. Wrong. He is not Hannibal, and he is not himself, and instead he's stuck somewhere in between, somewhere undefined.

"You look ridiculous," says his reflection, and then his reflection is wearing an old flannel and some work pants. Will glances down at himself, and sees the suit remains. "Not yourself at all."

He looks back up at himself. "I don't have a lot of options, these days," he says. Their voices are identical. And aside from the difference in clothing, they move identically. When Will speaks, the mouth of his reflection moves. And when his reflection speaks-

("Only for lack of trying.")

-Will feels his throat work, his tongue shift behind his teeth.

"Some of us are bound by rules. Law. Reality."

“Whereas some of us only cling to it.”

Will watches as he smiles.

He wants to look away but finds he can’t. He is fascinated by himself in a way he never has been before, and it might be dream logic or the novelty of seeing himself but *not* himself, he’s not sure. He has never enjoyed looking at himself, not for any length of time.

He does now.

There is nothing in his reflection that hints at any difference. It mocks him, how clear the image is. How familiar. He looks for the fault lines, the scars of what has been done to him, and finds none.

It’s a lie. He knows it’s a lie.

“Would you replace me, if you could?” he asks.

His reflection doesn’t consider; it only laughs. “No,” he says eventually. “Why would I?”

“It must be terrible, to sleep for so long, only to wake up- confused. Disoriented. Grasping for whatever you can reach.”

His reflection says nothing. Will doesn’t consider how well what he’s said could describe himself.

“Grasping for him,” he says, and looks down at Hannibal’s corpse. It doesn’t look like a body, but it doesn’t look alive, either. A mannequin, perhaps.

“Aren’t you jealous?”

He doesn’t know which him says it. But he does know the answer. *No* . No, he’s not jealous. Neither of him is jealous. Why be jealous, when either Hannibal cannot be owned, or is, already, owned by him?

It doesn’t really matter which one.

Does it?

“You and I are not the same,” he says, and scowls.

“There is nothing dividing us save a few quirks of conditioning,” Will says in response. “A few desperately held beliefs.”

“That killing is wrong?”

“That you’re not a killer,” he corrects. “And that there is a *before* and an *after* .”

“You’re a constructed thing,” Will says, and his voice drips with so much acrid disdain that the whole world begins to curdle from it. There is no Hannibal beneath him anymore, and the

suits that surround him begin to unravel, warp and weft diverging inexorably.

“But to what end?” he asks himself as silk and wool and cotton fill the air, wrap around his fingers and throat and tongue. “What was I made to do?”

“To kill,” Will gasps, choking on the slip-slide of fiber into his nostrils, down to his belly.

“No,” the threads of himself, of Hannibal, whisper. “Not quite.”

Will wonders how many people he’s killed.

It’s a minimum of eight now. One BSHCI nurse, two orderlies, three guards. Abel Gideon. Garret Jacob Hobbs.

He only actually remembers the last. But he feels the weight of all of them. Does he feel the weight of any others? There must be more; his dreaming mind has hung a flashing neon sign on the one bit of this whole mess he hasn’t actually let himself consider. If this was done to him, *years* ago, it was done for a reason, and if that reason is based in violence, then, by design, there must be others. Other deaths. Other murders. What are the chances he was made and then… left on the shelf?

Unless the violence *wasn’t* the point.

He needs to get his hands on an internet connection. He needs to do research and refine his idea of *what* this insane government program might actually have been, based on something more than cultural osmosis and late night conspiracy radio.

Of course, he comes to all these conclusions long after Hannibal has silently come and gone, leaving lunch (some sort of thin-cut aged meat served with oil and tiny new potatoes, with a uselessly helpful card labeled *bresaola* , and no indication of what animal, exactly, the delicious meat came from; he eats it with only minor hesitation). Will slept through the delivery, and has no idea how long it sat untouched. Now, Hannibal appears to be awake once more and is either in an unmonitored hallway or, more likely, his study.

It might be hours before the man reappears, let alone cooks and delivers dinner. Or it might only be a few minutes.

With no answers forthcoming on the *what, exactly, did the government do to me* front, he’s left with just himself. He doesn’t know how many people he’s killed, so he moves on to the next question, which is, perhaps, more important still:

Does he want to kill again?

His subconscious certainly says *yes* . It’s always said yes; he’s just gotten very good at burying the urge down, calling it mirroring of others’ mindsets. And it might still be. It might, in fact, be a mirroring of the artificial mindset trained into his brain.

So maybe the better question is, when he inevitably wants to kill again, *who* wants it?

Is he a killer, or has he only killed?

Hannibal's voice echoes through his head, unbidden:

There are times where the distinction feels appropriate. And others where it's of paramount importance to be clear that you are, in the end, the same person.

He's pretty sure this distinction is *appropriate*, if only because it suggests future actions and risk to others. He wants the distinction to be appropriate.

He wants there to *be* a distinction.

Will has his face buried in his hands when he hears soft sounds of movement from the screens. The volume is low enough that the footsteps are almost imperceptible, but Will's head jerks up as if on strings. He's desperate for the reminder that he isn't alone.

But Hannibal is nowhere on camera. The lacunae of the hallways grate on him. He wonders if Hannibal ever feels this way. If, when he's down here with his butchering, the Chesapeake Ripper ever wonders what is happening in his halls.

No , Will answers. Otherwise there would be cameras there.

Likely, Hannibal knows how sound travels in his domain so well that he doesn't need the additional visuals.

Will doesn't. He also doesn't know which screen the sound is coming from. Upstairs, echoing near the bedroom? Or somewhere in what isn't, in reality, a warren of halls connecting the downstairs rooms, but might as well be for how tricky mapping the screens on to his memories of the space itself proves to be.

He also has the added challenge of needing to decide if what he's hearing is Hannibal, or…

Who? The security detail?

Matthew Brown, somehow slipped inside to leave Will another offering?

Hannibal, at last, appears on screen in the kitchen, and Will is staggered by the intensity of his relief.

He watches as Hannibal sheds his jacket and waistcoat, watches as he folds up his shirtsleeves, watches as he ties an apron around his waist with so much casual confidence it looks like just an extension of his being, like sitting or walking. The screen is small but the picture is high def, and Will can see the ridges of the muscles and veins in his forearms. Along the backs of his hands.

Distantly, Will thinks he should feel guilty about looking that closely, but that feeling doesn't materialize. He leans in, memorizing details.

"Are you watching, Will?"

Will's mouth goes dry.

"I can think of no way for you to indicate except, perhaps, for you to turn on the shower." A pause as he quickly peels the ginger root he is now holding. "And I wonder if, having been asked, you'll be so contrary as to not do it."

"Oh, fuck off," Will mutters, but he's already reaching for the screen. It comes away from its support with just a light tug, but has an actual cord running to the back of it. Which means he has to choose between continuing to watch Hannibal's forearms flex as he grates the ginger into a fine paste, and going to turn on the shower so that Hannibal knows he has a captive audience.

Will waits for him to say something else.

When he doesn't, Will curses again, sets the screen back, and goes to turn on the shower. He lets it run thirty seconds, then shuts it off with a snap and jogs back to the screen.

(Maybe he should have walked, purely out of spite, or some desperate bid to tell himself he doesn't care, but what's the point? He may not know if he's a killer, but he does, unfortunately, know how much he orbits around Hannibal these days. His dreams are proof enough)

As Will slides back into his seat in front of the screen, Hannibal is gathering a few more ingredients from the fridge. He isn't speaking. Will is struck by the certainty that Hannibal is giving his audience time to return.

That certainty is born out when Hannibal resumes:

"I first had something similar to this dish when I was in Portland at a psychiatric conference," Hannibal muses as he whisks together a dash of coconut milk, some of the ginger, and a solid helping of mayonnaise, along with several other ingredients Will doesn't catch. Possibly garlic? Honey. He does see the honey. "The conference itself was largely useless. I recall only one presentation of minor interest, and the venue was inconvenient and overly air conditioned. I suspect the nearby restaurants also left much to be desired."

"But you did your research, of course," Will murmurs, arms crossed over his chest, hands gripping at his elbows tightly.

"The city does posses its gems, however. Their Japanese garden is well-curated, for instance." Hannibal goes to the fridge and removes two completely recognizable chicken breasts, vacuum sealed in the same packaging Will has seen inside the basement freezers. These are turned out onto a cutting board. As Hannibal disassembles them into large but even portions, he continues speaking. "In the southeastern part of the city, I visited an exquisite Thai restaurant. The back of the house is host to, on certain nights of the week, a reservation-only prix fixe meal." A glance up to the camera, and Will shivers as Hannibal appears to stare directly through to him.

It's only an illusion, he reminds himself.

Hannibal drops his gaze back to the meat. “I spent a delightful evening there,” he says, as he finishes the cuts and transfers the pieces into the bowl. “I also made a point to return the next morning to experience their front section, which is open most days of the week and is far more modestly priced. This dish is inspired by one of their brunch offerings, but I think you’ll find it savory enough for evening.”

Hannibal’s narration washes over him and feels much like he imagines a scalp massage would. His skin prickles and his whole body relaxes.

“I must admit I am not as familiar with the tradition as I should like to be. I do have my limits.” His gaze darts up to the camera and his smile is feline and conspiratorial. “But that hardly got in the way of my enjoyment.” As he speaks, Hannibal sets the dish of marinating chicken aside and bends over to retrieve what ends up being a clean bowl.

Will notices that on a delay, too distracted by the pull of fabric across Hannibal’s-

(*No. The forearms were bad enough. He was just distracted by the patter, not- not anything else.*)

“What I’m making for you tonight, I’ve made a few times before.” He considers a moment, and Will watches, helpless, as his tongue peeks out between his lips for just a moment. A flicker, then gone.

Will doesn’t miss any of it.

“I am mostly satisfied with it, but I admit, it’s not as flawless as what I usually offer you.”

Will shivers.

“In other circumstances, I would have liked to make you some of the dishes I had from the chef’s tasting menu on my first visit. I’ve practiced them more often, and I think they would have been even more to your tastes, even if, as I suspect, you aren’t familiar with Thai cuisine outside of pad thai and perhaps a few simplified curries.”

His eyes flick up again, and Will almost speaks, almost agrees. *No*, he almost says, *you’re right, shrimp pad thai with Bev is pretty much the closest I’ve gotten*, but Hannibal can’t hear him.

Can’t see him.

Can’t notice how flushed he’s gotten.

(Will suspect Hannibal can *imagine* it just fine, though.)

Hannibal adds flour and what Will assumes is sugar and salt to the bowl, then whisks it with a clean implement.

“The first dish that comes to mind is something the restaurant called ‘kanom dtom sai plaa hang’.” The bastard doesn’t hesitate or stutter over the pronunciation. "A smoked trout filling

wrapped in a dumpling skin made of pounded sticky rice, garnished with fried shallot and crisped trout skin, with a sesame-chili dipping sauce."

That *does* sound good. Will's stomach gurgles appreciatively, and his lips curl in an irritated snarl; it's not just his dick that's playing traitor, it seems.

"A contrast in textures, but ultimately a showcase for the tender flesh of the fish, heightened by the addition of smoke by a delicate hand," Hannibal- purrs? Is that the right word? He certainly looks satisfied. Having an audience of *Will* seems to play directly to his ego, his personal desires. Will makes himself look away from the man's face and down to his hands, which gently form a well in the mixed flour. Will watches the flex and play of his fingers as Hannibal cracks several eggs into the bowl, followed by a splash of milk and some more of the grated ginger.

"There were also two amuse-bouche you may have enjoyed as well, though I confess I don't know your feelings on shellfish. The first, miang som, is finely diced shrimp and navel orange, topped with cilantro, crushed peanuts, and crisped shredded coconut, served on a betel leaf. Savory with a sharp edge."

Will mutters at the screen, "I understand twenty percent of that," but of course Hannibal anticipates the response, because he continues:

"Betel leaf, from *Piper betle* , is related to both kava and the plant that produces black pepper." (*Of course. Why didn't he know that?* Will rolls his eyes.) "It is native to south and southeastern Asia, from Pakistan to Papua New Guinea, and the English-adopted name derives from a Tamil word, vettalai, which itself descends from Portugese. The plant is temperamental, requiring constant moisture but abhorring drowning; it must instead be irrigated frequently in small amounts. It is often, although not exclusively, prepared in combination with aracea nut, the consumption of which has a mild stimulant effect. Here, though, it's used more for its peppery flavor."

If Will had popcorn handy, he'd be throwing it at the screen now. It's easy, at times, to forget how *insufferable* Hannibal is capable of being. His lectures and demonstrations have always been engaging right up until the moment they're not.

But as Hannibal pauses and sets aside the dish of completed *something* batter, and leans back against the island to expose the line of his body to the camera, Will thinks Hannibal knows exactly when that line has been crossed.

"Well, go on," Will snipes after a moment. It's easier than appreciating how the apron nips Hannibal's waist in. How *intimate* this whole show really is, put on just for him. Entertainment, live and private, so private.

Hannibal knows he's watching, but can't know anything else about what he *feels* , after all.

At last, his host begins to speak again. "The second, kanom krog, is a rougher dice of scallop and galangal, tossed in coconut cream and garnished with lemongrass and lime leaf, served in a crisped rice cup."

Will tries to picture what that would taste like, but the texture is what he can imagine most clearly; the crack of the rice cup, the soft but toothsome give of the filling. The word *ceviche* passes through his mind, but then he pauses, unsure if it better describes this or the previous dish.

Hannibal, on this front, is unhelpful.

“Galangal,” he says as he begins slicing a cucumber, producing even rounds perhaps a quarter of an inch thick, enough that Will knows they’ll still snap between his teeth, but not so thick that they’ll be overly noticeable, “is similar to ginger, but is related only at the family level. In fact, there are four distinct types of galangal, across three different genera. In this case, I am fairly certain the restaurant used *Alpinia galanga*, or blue ginger.”

Fairly certain. It must gall him, not to be *sure*. If Will closes his eyes (and he does, briefly), he can see the interior of the restaurant. Small, a back room. Lush, but not ostentatious. Themed, of course; he sees woven reed cages as lampshades for the ceiling lights, and rich, hardwood tables. A bar, perhaps, right up against where the chefs are at work.

Hannibal would have wanted to sit right up against it, close enough to observe everything. But he doesn’t know which galangal they used, so either the prep happened prior to his arrival (certainly possible, almost likely), or…

Or he was seated far from the kitchen, and had to just deal with it.

Will likes that idea more. He’s smiling when he opens his eyes to find Hannibal massaging what looks like an egg yolk into the marinated chicken.

He’s been quiet, Will realizes, for at least a minute or two. Focused on the cooking for once? Or could he predict that Will would be so darkly, pointedly amused by his uncertainty?

On that front, Will isn’t sure. He wants to argue the latter, but then he remembers Hannibal crouched beside him on the pantry floor, whispering *I could never entirely predict you* .

That wasn’t a lie.

“Of course,” Hannibal says, breaking through both their reveries, “for the first dish, the dumpling, I would have liked *you* to provide the trout.” Will feels himself smiling before he can stop it, sees the image in his mind: him, with a stringer of invasive rainbow trout, trudging back to-

Wolf Trap.

Where he’s never going to set foot again.

He pushes the image aside and focuses on what is real and immediate: the basement, the screen, and Hannibal inside it, once more looking up at the camera.

“Barring that,” Hannibal murmurs, the picture of thoughtfulness, “the FBI can hardly be trusted to pick out quality seafood.”

A bark of laughter rips out of Will's throat, the sharper for contrasting so harshly with where his mind has just been. He tries to picture Jack, or Price, or *Zeller* , shopping for shellfish. He's pretty sure they'd bring back dead scallops.

(Bev, though- Bev probably at least knows they're *supposed* to be alive when you cook them.)

"They already drew the line at several items on the grocery list I gave them," Hannibal continues, and that slams Will back into the ground. "And selected produce so wildly unripe that I can only assume they did it deliberately. But we make do."

Will turns that thought over and doesn't like the way it fits into the jigsaw puzzle of their situation. It's possible the grocery trip happened *before* Hannibal made the whole security detail breakfast, but Will thinks if that were the case, Hannibal would have already grumbled about the poor treatment. And regardless, Will knows now exactly how much it is costing Hannibal to live under surveillance.

Any more of this, and the Chesapeake Ripper might snap.

With the yolk thoroughly massaged into the chicken, Hannibal washes his hands briskly, then carries the bowl to the side of the stove, where a wok filled with oil waits. It hisses as Hannibal adds the first piece of chicken using a pair of long wooden chopsticks. Two more are added to the pan before Hannibal sets the bowl aside. Will's stomach gives another longing gurgle as the batter crisps up and grows golden brown.

"So we are left with this dish," Hannibal says as he turns each piece. "Bird in a blanket. Fried chicken in a fish sauce-based dressing, served inside a pillowy ginger crepe." As the chicken fries, he sets a new pan on a fresh burner. His patter grows silent as he moves each cooked piece to a rack to drain, as he adds more, as he, at last, pours the batter into the new pan and begins to cook the crepes. "Comfort food, with a twist," he adds when there is another moment's breath, glancing up at the camera with the softest smile Will has seen on him yet.

Will's mouth is watering.

For the food. For the man. And he can't say that either isn't *him* , because it is him, he's gone too far down this path to deny either anymore. If that hadn't been chicken breast in that package, if it had been Andrew Caldwell's kidney frying to shatteringly crisp perfection, he'd be just as hungry.

He covers his face with his hands and moans, and it is equal parts devastated helplessness and an indefinite, expansive *want*.

This basement, this liminal, dreamlike existence, has stripped every drop of context from him. Without the world pressing in on him from every side, reminding him of what he *must* be, he's not so certain now that he knows himself at all. And he can argue all day, every day, that he is simply taking on Hannibal's worldview like the loaned clothing he is wearing, but he knows what that feels like.

It doesn't feel like this.

This feels…

Familiar. This feels like himself.

He makes himself lift his head and look outside himself. He catches the tail end of plating, and the angle is all wrong; he can barely see the dishes, and there is no trace of Hannibal's expression as he crafts two plates that will be, of course, perfect. Just the shifting of his scapulae below his pressed shirt, the slightly soft edge at the nape of his neck where Hannibal's barber has been unable to touch up the fall of his hair.

And then, finished, Hannibal disappears from the screen. Above, Will can hear the furniture that protects the trap door slide out of the way.

His heart hammers in his chest. He can feel the heat in his cheeks and down his throat, skin flushed red like he's just been caught watching porn.

The trap door swings up.

Will keeps his gaze averted as Hannibal descends. It's too late to run to the bathroom, splash cold water on himself, so instead he dredges up the memories of why he should be furious, not entranced. *Abigail* , he thinks, and he remembers the ear in the sink, but Abigail is safe. Abigail is close by.

Georgia Madchen , he thinks, and that offers some purchase. There's no faking *her* death, and she only died because she might have revealed Hannibal's machinations.

(*But she knew she was already dead*, his traitorous brain whispers.

She suffered, he hisses back.)

The dogs, he settles on, because that-

That is something Hannibal can't fix.

That is something he will never get back. The purest, best thing he has ever done, and they are gone for good.

It helps counteract the longing he feels when Hannibal reaches the table and sets down one of the most deliciously fragrant meals he's ever smelled.

Will hazards a glance up at him. "Dinner *and* a show? You're really going above and beyond now."

"You missed out on breakfast's," Hannibal replies, easily. "Wait here, I'll fetch the wine."

"Is it smart, eating down here with me where they can't see you?" It's the first time he's ever brought *two* dishes down, Will notes.

Hannibal hesitates. Will sees a flicker of irritation across his sculpted features. An *atom* of fury, at the reminder of their unwanted, intrusive audience. "You may be right," he concedes

after a moment.

He is bitter, so bitter that Will can taste it.

He *wants* to be down here, of course. The show was only a prelude. After their… altercation in the closet, after their confessional in the pantry, he wants to sink into Will a little further. He *wants*, as much as Will wants.

For a moment, Will considers convincing him to stay. He'd remain pulled taut, vibrating with anger and need, and the risk of discovery would be electric. But acknowledging the need in his gut is different from giving into it.

He's not that far gone. He knows there won't be any coming back, should he walk down that road. There will be no quiet retirement for him, a new identity sinking deep into some wooded lot somewhere, keeping quietly and safely to himself, not if he gives in.

So he doesn't.

"Can you bring your tablet back down in the morning?" he asks, and he picks up his fork and cuts into the crepe. A dismissal, rude and final. "I'm running into my lack of knowledge about MKUltra," he adds, lips twisting in what is becoming a very familiar smile-grimace combo. "Need to know what I'm looking for."

"Of course," Hannibal replies. He considers Will a moment longer, then picks up his plate. "Do you have any requests? For breakfast?"

"Something that keeps," Will says, not missing a beat. "I don't know when I'll be up. Honestly, just a thermos of coffee."

For a moment, Will thinks he's gone too far. That Hannibal's mask will crack, his patience end, because this is the sharpest and most impersonal dismissal Will's given him so far. Hannibal is very still for nearly a minute, and then he inclines his head.

"I have a few ideas," he says, and if it's true or just an attempt to cover whatever just went through his brain with paralyzing force, Will couldn't say, because he's averted his eyes with a twinge of something that feels very much like shame.

"Thanks," Will tells his plate.

"Sleep well, Will," Hannibal tells him, and Will cuts another piece of crepe and chicken as he listens to footsteps retreat up the stairs, to the trap door closing, to the furniture settling back into place.

He finally takes a bite of his dinner. It is, of course, one of the best meals he's ever eaten.

The only possible way to improve it would have been to eat with company.

Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

> *Will, at last, staggers to his feet. He pauses just long enough to rinse out his mouth at the sink, then stumbles into the main room, bypassing his shirt, going straight to the laptop. It's still open on the photo of that house, but overlaid is a request to start a video chat.*
>
> *It says* ***Your physician is in the waiting room. Click ACCEPT to start your appointment.***
>
> *He stares at the message as the chime continues. There's a little clock, ticking down.*
>
> *He hits* ***ACCEPT*** *at two seconds remaining.*
>
> --
>
> Will finally remembers. Hannibal gets him a gift.
>
> (@chaotic_plotter held my hand through this chapter, as always! Also, all the things Will finds out in his research on the CIA and Project MKUltra? All real. It's not great.)

In the morning, alongside his breakfast of what appears to be incredibly fancy deviled eggs (*hard boiled eggs* , his mind supplies, *he's frustrated and retaliating with a dismissal, but of course he can't do anything by halves*), is not Hannibal's tablet but an entire laptop.

(There's also a beard trimmer on the bathroom sink counter, and new hair products in the shower, labeled for curly hair. Will does his best to ignore both, to relegate them to *Hannibal Lecter's obsession with hospitality*, but he does wonder about how he got all of that. Was this part of the FBI watchdogs' shopping trip?

How did Hannibal excuse *curly hair products*?)

The laptop has only one user profile with no personal files visible, so either Hannibal has partitioned his own machine or simply has an extra laptop lying around. Given that it's already loaded with an entire anonymous browsing set up, Will thinks that the latter is most likely. Good for any serial killer's random browsing and even better for hiding the presence of an FBI fugitive in one's basement.

Hannibal has, of course, included a brief readme with instructions.

Will eats his passive-aggressive eggs, drinks the thermos of coffee that is still quite hot, and gets to work. There is a wide range of information out there on the internet. Most is full on

conspiracy theory, and Will sets that aside for the moment, instead focusing on the official FOIA and declassified stuff.

Even that's a lot.

The basic gist: it's the 1950s, communism is on the rise, and desperate, frightened US government employees have no hope of understanding why. (This is a charitable read; Will isn't sure he subscribes to it.) Mind control is as good an answer as any, and is a lot more concrete and simple than any other explanation. It's something that can be countered. That can be used.

So they use it.

It is terrifyingly large doses of LSD, among other things. One "participant" (Will regards the designation dubiously; that's like saying that *he* was a participant in Hannibal Lecter's 'research', instead of a victim) was dosed with LSD continuously for one hundred and *seventy-four* days. Sometimes the CIA told the participants what would happen to them. A lot of the time, they didn't. Alongside the drugs, there's confirmed documentation of electroshock therapy at shockingly high levels. Radiation. Wild regimens of drugs designed to make targets entirely dependent upon their tormentors. At its core, the program was all about burning out the preferences and foibles of an individual and replacing it with something more biddable.

Hannibal would've felt right at home. Chilton likewise.

Reported side effects are wide ranging and uniformly horrible, but they include long-lasting health complications and, of course, amnesia.

And that's what's in the files the CIA didn't manage to destroy. There's even documentation stating that the CIA implanted *literal computer chips* into six dogs and were somehow able to control them via a *remote*.

He's not sure he believes it worked. He *does* believe that the CIA thought it worked.

But for everything the CIA admits to, for all their lofty goals of changing warfare so that an army might be incapacitated before ever firing a single shot thanks to the miracle of modern chemistry, there's not a single thing about making killers built to order.

Which leaves the conspiracy theories. Frantic, desperate attempts to rationalize the horrors of school shootings. Thousands of videos dissecting various celebrity appearances, usually featuring what is very obviously (to Will, at least) human distractibility, overstimulation, and plain exhaustion, but which is always interpreted as proof of the celebrity in question 'receiving orders'. (Why would it happen during a public appearance? Why would it be so plainly visible if that was necessary? These questions are rarely answered.) There's a surprisingly large contingent of true believers who are convinced there's an underground clone sex ring that possibly involves the British royal family.

Apparently, some people don't even trust that the *moon* is real.

It would be easy to blame movies and TV for the various theories (and oh god, how are they *all* anti-Semitic?) involving government-brainwashed killing machines, and he does blame the media for roughly ninety-nine percent of them. But then, of course, there is… himself.

Somewhere between the conspiracy theories and the official government record is Will Graham.

He can see a few options. One: he was never a part of any government program, and he split his consciousness to cope with… something. (Several hours of research on dissociative identity disorder makes this feel unlikely, given what he does know about himself.) Two: he was part of a government program and the strain of it harmed his psyche, but they never meant to make a killer out of him. This seems reasonable; after all, when he thinks about it for longer than a few seconds, he doesn't *actually* remember where his pendulum visualization technique actually came from, and there are references to experiments designed to enhance recall and information processing. But in that case, his appetite for murder is entirely home grown, completely unrelated to everything except, perhaps, the memory loss.

Three: there's a kernel of truth to the conspiracy theories.

He's paging through another message board when he sees it. A scan of a newspaper dated during the couple of years he was still on the force down in New Orleans, from a small town paper out in Alabama. A town he's fairly sure he's never been in, but he *knows* the street in one of the photographs.

He knows the house.

Will forces himself to read the text, but it's unhelpful. The guy who posted it in the first place calls out some inconsistencies in the article, then adds that he had to scan his own copy of the clipping because it never got digitized, and he couldn't find it in the records at the local library, either. There are a lot of responses telling the guy that the "inconsistencies" he's fixated on are just bad editing in the newsroom or accusing him of photoshopping (or even entirely inventing) the image, and a surprisingly small contingent that take the post and run with it, spinning out increasingly ridiculous ideas.

But there *is* something about this article. It's brief, despite being about an apparent family annihilation. The dad comes home late, shoots his wife and grandmother, shoots himself. No kids, and *maybe* that's why there's no other coverage of the crime when Will searches for it himself, or *maybe* it was all made up.

Or maybe it was hidden.

Because Will knows, he *knows*, he was in that house. He shudders as he looks at the photo again. His thoughts begin to grey out, that seductive offer of *let me drive for a bit*, and he can smell kudzu and magnolia. He blinks, and the house isn't drenched in daylight anymore, isn't grainy from newsprint and a low resolution scan, but is sitting quiet beneath a half-full moon. There are a few lights on inside; it's after sunset, but not too late, not yet.

He's not in front of the house, out on the street, though he's seen the front porch before. Right now, he's in a swale out back.

He's not alone.

The man beside him (*Mr. Winston* , memory supplies, though whether it's from years ago or the other day when Hannibal offered the name, Will isn't sure) is maybe a decade older than Will, decently fit, and entirely at ease. So is Will. Will isn't looking directly at him; he's focused on the house.

Mr. Winston murmurs into his ear.

The actual words don't resolve, but Will can feel them slither along his cortex. He has no weapons, but he does know the location of the gun safe inside that house. He knows, too, exactly when his target's wife and grandmother will bed down for the night. He knows how long the window will be before his target returns home.

It's important that he get the timing right. If he moves too soon, the facts might not line up enough to prove that his target killed them both, and it is very important that his target be discredited even in death.

"A shame," Mr. Winston says, and now the words make sense. "He could have just done this himself, saved us the trouble." And Will knows that this is not the first attempt the CIA have made to (*silence the man. He knows something he shouldn't and is the type to talk.)* handle the problem, because he's only ever pulled in when first and second attempts have failed.

When they need somebody who can make a hit look like *something else*.

The lights in the house wink out.

"It's time," Mr. Winston says. "Have fun, Will."

He does.

Will comes back to himself in the bathroom. His fingers clutch at the edge of the sink so hard that his nailbeds are white and straining, and though there is no blood on him, he can feel it everywhere.

He can still smell gunshot residue. The whole thing, taken together, has him threatening to drift into the memory of his arrival at Hannibal's house, and if he pushes just a little more, maybe he'll remember-

He doesn't want to remember.

Shaking, he forces himself to let go of the sink and instead pull at his shirt. He gets it over his head with difficulty, throws it out into the room beyond and leans once more in towards the mirror, chest heaving with effort. *There*. There's the scar on one shoulder from the stab wound that ended his police career, and there's the fresher mark of Jack's bullet in the other, and above both is the small scab of the scalpel wound and the larger bruise of Hannibal Lecter's teeth on his throat.

He is *not* in that house in Alabama. He is not in the BSHCI.

He's here.

He's here.

He's falling to his knees, crawling to the toilet, and retching, pitiably, horribly, and that is, at last, what makes the tears come.

Time passes. He does his level best not to think: not in words, not in images, and definitely not in memories. He grows cold and shocky, shivering relentlessly, but he doesn't move. He doesn't want to move. Moving will remind him he has a body. Moving will remind him of what that body has done.

The light doesn't change. It never changes down here. He does listen, half-heartedly, for the sound of the trap door opening. Strains to smell something beyond bile and the soft botanical scent of hair products, some new gastronomic creation that he can find some way to tease Hannibal about, some kind of distraction, some guarantee that he isn't alone.

None of it comes. But eventually he hears an unfamiliar mechanical chiming.

It repeats for at least thirty seconds, then falls silent. Resumes a minute (maybe more) later. It's halfway to a ringtone, but there's no phone down here, just-

Just the laptop.

Will, at last, staggers to his feet. He pauses just long enough to rinse out his mouth at the sink, then stumbles into the main room, bypassing his shirt, going straight to the laptop. It's still open on the photo of that house, but overlaid is a request to start a video chat.

It says *Your physician is in the waiting room. Click ACCEPT to start your appointment*.

He stares at the message as the chime continues. There's a little clock, ticking down.

He hits *ACCEPT* at two seconds remaining.

The window goes blank, then expands into a fullscreen view of Hannibal sitting in what Will assumes is the study. "Good morning, Will," Hannibal says, "I'd apologize for the interruption, but-"

And then he stops, no doubt taking in Will's disheveled appearance. There's a little square in the bottom right corner and Will glances at it warily. Shirtless, sweaty, hair plastered to his head, eyes wild… no, he doesn't look good.

He sinks into the nearby chair and covers his face with his hands. "Morning," he mutters.

"Did something happen?" Hannibal asks, voice full of concern. There's a slight edge of- not panic, but something related.

"An episode," Will says, still refusing to look up. He's still shivering and has no idea if that's visible. He doesn't want to know. "Found- something. Figured something out."

His voice cracks on the last few words and he's back in that swale, he's back in that house, he can hear that man begging, *pleading* , even as Will forces the gun into his hand and into his mouth-

"I'll be right there. Will, can you hear me?"

He nods. He thinks he nods. He's too busy fighting the greying at the edges of his vision, because what he doesn't want- what he *really doesn't want* - is for Hannibal to come down here only to find his other self driving (*which other self? Which killer?* They feel different, they feel so different, what does that *mean-)*

"Don't come," Will gasps out.

There's no response.

He looks up and the video connection has shut down. The picture of the house in Alabama stares at him instead.

With a snarl, he lunges forward and slams the laptop shut.

He's got, what, two minutes before Hannibal shows up? If that. He's in control, but he doesn't know how long that will last. He staggers away from the table and into one of the tool cabinets that line the walls. It's pristine, scrubbed to a bright shine that hurts his eyes, and he drags open drawers, hands fumbling over the contents. He doesn't know what he's looking for.

He just knows that he's terrified.

He's out of control. He knows what Mr. Winston would do to him, finding him like this; it's the same thing he had Will do to that man, to his family. An asset who can't keep his mouth shut and behave is worse than useless, he is a liability, and whatever Will was in those days, he's certainly not *behaving* now. The distance between what he remembers about that night and what he saw in that video of himself and Hannibal stretches miles and miles and miles, he is out of control, he is a feral thing, he-

"Will."

Will's head jerks up and so does his hand, wrapped around the grip of a bone saw.

Hannibal stands several feet away. He is still, both hands raised, gaze unwavering and expression placid. "Put that down, Will," he murmurs. "Tell me what happened."

Will looks down at the sharp-toothed metal in his hand and sees it cutting not into Hannibal's throat but into his own wrist. With a cry, he lets go. It clatters back into the drawer and Will retreats from it, his shivering turning into full body quakes. That grey static is back, threatening to obliterate him.

"Put me out," he manages, staring at his hands, seeing blood that isn't there. "Sedate me. Something. I can't- I *can't*-"

“You don’t want that,” Hannibal says. “I’m going to come to you. Alright?”

Will nods first, a few jerky motions, then shakes his head. “You shouldn’t be here. It’s not safe.”

“You won’t hurt me.” Hannibal takes a step. Another. Will retreats even though he doesn’t want to, even though he’d rather fall to his knees or close the distance between them. He’s a mess, a chaotic braid of three distinct mindsets, and he clings to the one that is most familiar. The one that is most scared.

That’s him, isn’t it? The one who knows this is very, very wrong.

“You can’t know that,” Will whispers, even as he collides with the wall behind him, presses his shaking hands flat against it. “You can’t be *sure*.”

“Do you want to hurt me?”

Will shakes his head. “No. Yes. Sometimes.”

“Right now, Will. What do you want to do right now?”

“I *don’t know*.” He thuds the back of his skull against the wall in emphasis, and it feels good, so he does it again, and again, until the sharp thudding pain overtakes the chaos just a little, and then-

And then broad hands cup his cheeks, stilling him. Hannibal is firm but not rough, and Will sucks in a half-strangled gasp of air. He shuts his eyes, because he doesn’t want to see, not anymore, but he drinks in the warmth of Hannibal’s touch, the solidity of it.

He doesn’t fight when Hannibal draws him from the wall. He lets himself be guided to the floor, and when Hannibal’s hands move, one to the aching back of his skull and one to the bare skin of his waist, he lets himself be pulled forward against the other man’s chest, sitting sideways over his lap.

The world is dark and warm, and for a moment, all Will can hear above the pounding of his own heart is the steady beat of Hannibal’s.

For a moment, everything feels so very simple.

“Your name is Will Graham,” Hannibal murmurs into his hair. “It is eleven thirty-seven in the morning, and you are in Baltimore, Maryland.”

(*And none of this is simple*.)

Will shudders, fingers curling tight into the fabric of Hannibal’s waistcoat. He can’t see it and doesn’t remember which one it is, but it feels familiar and Will thinks, distantly, that it’s probably the one with the red windowpaning, the one he wore to play at being Hannibal, the one he left in a heap on Hannibal’s floor. He’s not sure if he hates that or appreciates it. He’s not sure about many things.

“My name is Will Graham,” he mumbles, lips and tongue clumsy on the words. “It’s been a very long week and I’m not sure you should ever let me out of this basement.”

Hannibal hums thoughtfully, and the sound is large and resonant in his chest. Will presses closer before he realizes what he’s doing. Before he can think better of it, the hand on his head pets down his sweaty hair with the slightest bit of force.

Stay , it tells him.

He’s too tired to argue. He sags against Hannibal a little more.

“I’d have to give you vitamin D injections, were that the case,” Hannibal muses, idly.

Will can’t help his brittle snort. “Right. Forgot. You’ve actually done that before.”

“Once or twice,” Hannibal agrees, sounding- fond. “Though never on request.”

“Don’t you have patients?” Will rasps. He rubs the fabric of the waistcoat between his fingers, intending to let go but never quite managing it. The texture is soothing. It has nothing to do with blood.

He can feel it all along his chest and arms, dragging at his skin.

“You did click *accept* on the appointment prompt. I believe that makes *you* my patient at the moment.”

Will shakes his head, rubbing his cheek against Hannibal’s lapel. “Thought that was just your way of asking what I wanted for lunch.”

“It was going to be,” he admits. “A way to talk more often without raising suspicions, too. But I have the hour blocked out, regardless.”

“ *This* will ‘raise suspicions’ though. You being down here in the middle of the day, when you should be in the study.”

“They do not have access to my schedule,” Hannibal says, and for just a moment, there is a snarl in his voice. He schools it away as he continues, “For all they know, I am once more sulking in my wine cellar.”

Will’s lips twitch into a smile despite himself.

“Would you like to discuss what happened?” Hannibal asks. “Or do you need a little more distance?”

Distance. Will half expects Hannibal to let go of him now, finally, but he doesn’t. Will fully expects to *want* to move away, but… he doesn’t.

This is easier. Not simple, not at all, but *easier*. Easier not to see, not to have to look at Hannibal’s face or feel his gaze on him, easier not to wander this clinically clean basement with endless weapons to fidget with.

God, had he really considered sawing off his *hand*? (No. *Consideration* had nothing to do with it. But he might have done it anyway.)

Will takes a deep breath. “Right, uh- the laptop. It has an article up, local crime beat. I… I *recognized* it.”

“But you think you shouldn’t have,” Hannibal hazards.

“Exactly. I’ve never been to that town - or, never *knew* I’d been to that town - and it’s not a case I ever worked on. Never even made the news, outside of that one story in the local paper. There’s no way I could have recognized it, except…”

“Except by way of your other self.”

“There’s a photo, in it. Of the house where the murders took place. It was enough of a trigger, apparently, and so I got front row seats to reliving it in technicolor.” His voice grows derisive, caustic. He shivers again. Hannibal strokes his back. “I got to meet Mr. Winston,” he adds.

“And the experience was distressing.”

Will grimaces. “Yeah. Distressing’s a good word for it. I- I lost time, though not much, if it’s not even noon yet. And I got to take the CIA’s version of me for a spin. He’s… I was… different. Not like me, and not like our mutual friend.”

Hannibal makes a concerned noise at that. Suddenly, Will wishes he could see Hannibal’s expression, but when he tries to straighten up, Hannibal’s arms tighten. “Not yet,” he says, softly.

“I’m fine. Now,” Will argues.

“Humor me. Tell me why you didn’t want me to let you out of the basement. What about this mindset scared you? How was it different?”

Will swallows, caught between the urge to tell Hannibal everything and the desperate desire to hide it all, to forget it, to pretend it hadn’t happened. “It was like I was a machine,” Will whispers after a long struggle. “No autonomy. No choice. I was brought in to do a task, and I did it. It felt amazing because they conditioned me to enjoy it; there was nothing more to the experience. There was nothing left of *me* , only the pleasure of completing the job. They reduced me, *refined* me, down to the exact same skills that Jack has - *had* - me using.”

“A phasmid,” Hannibal says. “An anonymous ghost. They took advantage of your unique aptitudes to remove targets while making it look like average misfortune, erasing you from the narrative as soon as they introduced you. Do you have any better sense of when this was done to you?”

“When I was back in Louisiana, at the latest. Maybe before that, I don’t know.”

“When you were younger, more impressionable,” Hannibal agrees. “But still talented enough to catch somebody’s attention.” He falls quiet, and Will imagines, just for a moment, what it would’ve been like if he’d caught *Hannibal’s* attention instead. He likes to think he would’ve

known enough to run, even then, but he can't blame the CIA's tinkering for how thoroughly he overlooked Hannibal's monster. No, he probably would've been exactly as drawn to him as he is now.

Maybe more.

"Given that timeline," Hannibal says, "do you think your conditioning may have been a contributing factor to your inability to shoot the suspect who attacked you? Perhaps it introduced just enough of a hesitation."

Will rolls his shoulder, feels the familiar tug of the old injury. "No, that's not it. The reason I didn't shoot him was because I was afraid," he says. "Of what that would make me. It was a choice, not to shoot."

Hannibal doesn't argue. "So this automaton mindset," he says instead, "is what those who conditioned you *wished* you to be. And the mindset that brought you here from the BSHCI is what you made of it, over time. However long you were separated from Mr. Winston, it appears to have been long enough to allow for change. Evolution. Into the other self we're now familiar with, one who doesn't scare you as much."

Strange, to think of it that way, but Will nods. "Not as much, no."

"And this mindset, perhaps, also converges on the truth of you."

"*No*," Will says, reflexively.

"Unimpeded, without guilt or shame, delighting in what you are capable of. But also reckless, lacking the context that allows you to delay gratification and choose which options lead to your goals."

Will scowls. "If you bring Freud into this-"

"No, I don't think he needs to join the conversation," Hannibal says, and the hint of disgust that creeps into his voice startles a laugh out of Will.

That, at last, makes Hannibal's hands gentle on him, and Will lifts his head, blinking reddened, swollen eyes. The room seems too bright, and Hannibal is far too close, but he doesn't feel like he's on the verge of shaking apart anymore. He regards Hannibal for a long, quiet moment, forcing his breathing to remain even, refusing to move out of his lap.

"Maybe you're right," he says, finally. "That whatever I was made before, I've… developed, since then. But I wouldn't call that other version of me *true*."

"And what would you call this version?" Hannibal asks.

"You prefer this version," Will says.

"That's irrelevant. Is this version *true*?"

Will hesitates. His lips part and he draws in a long, shaky breath. “It’s real,” he says, slowly. “It’s real, but I don’t know if it’s true or not. I don’t know if that’s… possible.”

With him. With anybody. He’s not sure anymore. Existence is frighteningly malleable.

Hannibal considers Will’s answer, then inclines his head and lets go of Will entirely. There’s an awkward moment where Will peels himself off of Hannibal’s lap, and they both stand, Hannibal steadying him with barely-there pressure on Will’s waist. He *is* wearing the suit Will tried on the other day, and it looks just as ridiculous on him.

And Will is still naked from the waist up. Flushing, Will turns away in search of his shirt.

Behind him, he hears a metal click as Hannibal no doubt retrieves the bone saw and puts it away neatly. “I have something to tell you,” Hannibal says after Will hears the drawer shut. “Good news, this time.”

Will yanks the shirt over his head, then glances over his shoulder. “Jack’s pulling the detail?” he ventures.

Hannibal shakes his head. “Unfortunately, no.”

He’s unprepared for how disappointed he is; it was, after all, only a joke. But even if he’s not directly dealing with the eyes Hannibal has on him so much of the time, he can still feel the weight. He can still want it gone.

He can still want to *actually* be safe.

“Well, go on, then,” he says.

“Alana will be bringing Winston over this evening.”

Will stops breathing. He frowns. He couldn’t have heard right, but the only other option is that Alana is bringing a missing CIA handler to Hannibal’s house, which is even more absurd, and-

And fuck, he needs to sit down.

“She’s- what?” he manages, weakly, looking around for the chair, but it’s like the whole room has been rearranged while he wasn’t looking. He’s suddenly, irrationally furious with Hannibal for telling him this *now* , while he’s still staggering from his bloody ramble down memory lane, but *tonight*, he said *tonight*, and-

“I can’t take all of them, of course,” Hannibal is saying, and Will’s ears are ringing, and he doesn’t find the chair but he does find a table to lean on, hands clutching at the edge.

“You’re adopting my dog?” he asks.

Hannibal pauses. Regards him, though Will barely sees it. “As far as Alana is concerned, yes, but I see it more as restoring that which I took from you. As best as I am able.”

That startles a cracked sob from his chest. It's like Hannibal read his mind last night, but no, they'd talked about this in the pantry, too. And Hannibal knows him. Hannibal knew, even without Will having to mention it, the wound the loss of his dogs had driven into his soul.

"Tonight," he whispers.

"Tonight," Hannibal agrees. He searches Will's face. "Is that okay?"

Is that okay?

It is. Of course it is.

Except that it isn't.

What he wants, more than anything, is to bury his hands and face in Winston's fur and just breathe, just feel for one fucking moment like everything's okay, but how is this going to work? How is Hannibal going to disappear and reappear a whole dog three times a day? No, Winston will have to stay upstairs, but he'll be so close. It'll be fucking *torture* , how can't Hannibal see that?

But when the security detail is pulled, when he leaves this place…

Winston will be able to go with him.

And this is the *only* way that could happen.

"It's okay," he says. He swallows, throat thick and sticking, and looks back up at Hannibal. "It's okay. I- thank you. He's a runner, though, you know that, right? Alana told me he keeps- keeps going back to Wolf Trap."

Hannibal takes a step towards him, and when Will doesn't flinch away, only looks up at him beseechingly, he takes another. Another. "He'll know you're here," Hannibal says, softly. "He'll know he's home."

Will bites back a sob. "He's going to shed on everything you own."

"As long as he doesn't think my shoes are chew toys."

"That's more of a Buster thing," Will says. "*Fuck*, you couldn't wait to tell me a little longer? I feel like I've just done the emotional equivalent of an ultramarathon."

"Would you have preferred to find out when Alana rings my doorbell?" Hannibal asks.

Will shakes his head. "No, I know, this is better, it's just- it's a lot. This whole *everything* is a lot." He squints up at Hannibal, who's now so close Will could reach out and touch him. "You're really trying to fix this, while you've got the chance," he says, with a hint of wonder in his voice.

Hannibal says nothing, but there's a glimmer of pain in his eyes. Will stands up, draws close as if he'll be able to make out its edges better, but he already knows what's in there. Not

regret; Hannibal doesn't *regret* what he's done.

But he's worried that, when Will is at last free to leave this place, he'll go without a single backwards glance. Disappear and become somebody else entirely.

Hannibal's afraid he'll be abandoned.

Will knows, though, that as much as that's the reasonable option, the correct choice, that he's not going to be able to do it, no more than he's going to surrender himself to Jack. No, they're stuck with each other.

You're mine until one of us dies.

"Thank you," Will says again, then leans in and presses his lips to Hannibal Lecter's.

For one terrible, blissful moment, neither of them move. Will shivers and waits for the world to go black, and Hannibal holds his breath as if waiting for the world to *end* .

When the world stays exactly as it is, Will makes a soft, broken sound, and Hannibal surges forward. One of his hands threads into Will's hair and the other goes to his waist, an exact match to how he'd held Will's body as his mind tried to fall apart, but this time, it's only Will. Only Will as he presses up against the length of Hannibal, only Will as he parts his lips and slides his tongue against the seam of Hannibal's mouth. The edge of the table bites into Will's hips, and it feels good, it feels perfect, and god but he's so relieved to stop fighting this.

Hannibal drinks him down, then pulls back just a fraction of an inch as he urges Will back up onto the table, slotting himself between his thighs. "Which one of you is driving?" he murmurs, dropping his head to mouth at Will's pulse.

Will's head drops back and he arches, hands scrabbling to unbutton Hannibal's waistcoat. "Me, it's me," he gasps. "Still me."

That draws a groan from Hannibal, and the hand in his hair tightens while the one at his waist slips beneath the hem of his shirt, palming up along his ribs. "And you want this," he says, half question, half wonderment.

"God, yes," Will says. "Since last night. Or the night before. I don't know. I don't know what's happening to me anymore." He's given himself half a dozen explanations to try and push this away, but that doesn't stop the truth of it, that he's rock hard and aching and so is Hannibal, and however they ended up here, he doesn't want it to stop.

So of course, that's when Hannibal's phone rings.

"Ignore it," Will groans.

"It's Jack," Hannibal says, and though he begins to lean away, his mouth doesn't leave Will's throat.

"Ignore him," Will repeats. "Fuck, just ignore him, don't stop."

“Will-”

“You’re with a patient, Hannibal.” Will tightens his thighs around Hannibal’s hips, drawing them close and tight together, and shudders at the jolt of pleasure that goes through him at the contact. “ *Ignore him* .”

But the phone keeps ringing, and Hannibal nips sharply at his pulse, kisses his lips one more time, and pushes away. Will stares at him, open-mouthed and hungry, as he retrieves his phone and accepts the call, passing a hand over his head to try to fix the mess Will’s made of his hair.

It’s probably just an update on Lounds’s murder, and Will has half a mind to close the distance between them and test Hannibal’s ability to stay calm under pressure.

But Hannibal’s expression goes stony as Will watches.

Jack’s words are indistinguishable. His tone isn’t. Will knows that tone. That tone says a body’s dropped, but Matthew Brown wouldn’t have killed again so soon, and Jack wouldn’t have called Hannibal for an irrelevant murder, so what…

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Hannibal hangs up the phone, dark gaze boring into Will’s, all heat replaced with an endless chill.

“What is it?” Will asks, but he knows. He already knows.

Hannibal’s upper lip twitches into the faintest of snarls.

“It appears,” he says, “that they’ve found Miriam Lass.”

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Hannibal regards him for a moment, and Will thinks he can see a faint smile on his lips. He'd shed his coat in the foyer, and he looks at ease. Calm. Not angry at all.

Maybe this is going to be okay. Maybe Hannibal will have even found his little escapade funny. Maybe he doesn't feel entirely betrayed.

(Ah. That's it, that's what's changed. Now that he's come to terms with how badly he wants Hannibal to map the entire topography of his mouth, he's also become a lot more concerned with Hannibal's feelings.)

--

Hannibal comes back from Miriam Lass's crime scene with Winston and... Chipotle? Will figures that's a good sign.

Will is wrong.

(Yes, @chaotic_plotter and I laughed ourselves silly at the idea of Hannibal having to get a burrito bowl at Chipotle.)

Chapter Notes

NO HARM WILL COME TO WINSTON, just want to put that out there right up front.

Hannibal is gone for a long time.

He left the laptop, so Will knows it's now nearly nine. His stomach churns from the deeply unpleasant combination of hunger, shame, and more than a little trepidation. He hadn't gotten a chance to explain before Hannibal had left. He'd been too shocked, too scattered from the rapid, heavy beat of his heart and the blazing heat in his veins, and Hannibal hadn't asked.

Hadn't waited.

He'd just left and covered the trap door behind him.

Will had, after yet another small breakdown (and how many of those has he had in the past week? He's not sure he wants to count), forced himself to take a freezing shower, use the new

hair products (they're made with different botanicals, and smelling not like Hannibal is an unexpected benefit, as is the slight lift to his curls once his hair dries), and trim his beard. He's not, *exactly*, preening; it's more nervous fidgeting. Though maybe it'll help: following the unspoken instructions, making himself look more attractive than the sweaty, panicked mess he was that morning.

Because when Hannibal gets back…

Well. It's not like Will has done anything to point Jack *at* Hannibal, but in the face of all of Hannibal's new radical honesty, Will's deliberate omission of knowing Abigail is alive and, moreover, was in need of body disposal techniques is…

Not sporting.

Not *polite*.

"Fuck," Will says for likely the hundredth time in the last ten hours.

He has considered, more than once, breaking out of the basement. It must be possible; his other self did it handily the other night. If he can get out of the basement, he can *probably* get up to Hannibal's room undetected (again, he's done this before, even if he can't remember it), and from there into the closet. *If* the burner phone is still there, he could call Abigail. He could…

What? Warn her? Apologize to her? Ask for tips on appeasing his captor?

And just like every other time, this is where the impulse stops.

(Maybe instead he should break out of the basement, get up to Hannibal's bedroom and… what? Surprise him on the bed? Jump him from his hiding place inside the closet and disable or otherwise distract him? No, maybe he should just *leave* , screw the security detail, it's got to be better than…)

And again, the impulse dies out.

Because what, *really*, has changed since Will decided to tell Abigail to display Miriam Lass's body in a pointed *fuck you* to both Jack and Hannibal? If anything, he's ingratiated himself a lot farther with Hannibal, and Jack still doesn't know where he is. And anyway, he really didn't point Jack in this direction. Everything is fine. He can *explain*.

The front door opens.

Will jolts in his seat at the sound, and he focuses in on the screen. There's Hannibal's hand on the door knob. A white flash of plastic in his other hand.

And just below that is Winston.

Winston hesitates at the threshold, but there's the shadow of what Will assumes is a member of the security team behind them, and Winston knows Hannibal, even if he doesn't know this

house. He trots inside, leaving his leash slack even though Will can count the number of times Winston's worn one in his care on one hand. Winston glances back, expectantly.

Hannibal nods to a figure off screen, then steps inside and closes the door.

He's back, and Winston is at his side, along with a few bags of what Will assumes are supplies from Alana, and that means things can't be *that* bad, right?

Will watches Winston follow Hannibal to the kitchen, where his leash is at last unclipped. He stays close, but his head points unerringly toward the pantry.

Hannibal regards him for a moment. Will *thinks* he can see a faint smile on his lips. He'd shed his coat in the foyer, and he looks at ease. Calm. Not angry at all.

Maybe this is going to be okay. Maybe Hannibal will have even found his little escapade funny. Maybe he doesn't feel entirely betrayed.

(Ah. That's it, that's what's changed. Now that he's come to terms with how badly he wants Hannibal to map the entire topography of his mouth, he's also become a lot more concerned with Hannibal's feelings.)

Hannibal appears to consider the bags of supplies a little longer, before at last pulling something out of one of them and stepping out of camera range and into the pantry.

Will takes a deep breath. Holds it. Counts to thirty.

Above him, the furniture blocking the door shifts across the floorboards. Winston's nails click as he dances, probably uncertain. Will can picture his exact expression, and before he can stop himself, he's out of his chair and approaching the stairs. The door swings up, Winston tests the first step uncertainly, then bolts down with his entire back half whipping back and forth in surprised, confused joy.

Will's on his knees, arms outstretched, and for a few, blissful moments, he stops worrying about *everything* .

"Hey boy," he croons, grinning so wide his jaw hurts, and Winston sets his paws on his knees and licks over his entire face. Will shoves his hands into Winston's fur, presses his cheek to the dog's neck, and just- breathes.

It's perfect. It's *glorious*. It's something he thought he'd lost forever, and no matter what, Hannibal doesn't hate him enough to go back on his word, and god, but he's crying. He's crying, and he can't stop that, but he doesn't feel the least bit bad about it.

Winston squirms into his lap as if he has any chance of fitting, and Will laughs, tears in his eyes, and hugs Winston tight to his chest.

He's not sure how long he stays like that, cooing nonsense words and grinning at his dog while his dog dances and barks once or twice in overwhelming emotion, but when at last he thinks to look up again, Hannibal is still there. He's regarding the two of them curiously, but he's smiling.

That's good. That's *great*.

"Hey," Will says.

"You must be hungry," Hannibal says.

"Starving," he admits with a sheepish laugh, then wonders belatedly if that's a dig at Miriam's body being found, no doubt, in a butcher case as he directed. (Should he pretend not to know that? Is there any value in lying, saying he had nothing to do with this? No. He casts that thought aside a second after having it.) Realistically, it's just late, and he *is* hungry.

"Jack insisted on buying us all a late dinner," Hannibal says, and gestures to the table, which now holds what looks like another bottle of his people beer, as well as a biodegradable paper dish filled with-

"Chipotle?" Will asks, blinking owlishly. It's… surreal. More surreal than Hannibal's exquisitely plated offerings. He hasn't had fast food in *months*, and even smashed a little from the car trip, it looks delightfully familiar and *wildly* out of place. It's even heaped with unnaturally, vibrantly green extra guac. Did Hannibal ask, or did Jack insist out of some macho attempt to hide how devastated he must have been?

"Yes, Chipotle." The word sounds delightfully wrong in Hannibal's accent. "He was insistent and I figured this would keep well enough."

"Better than a burger," Will agrees. He glances up at Hannibal, hands deep in Winston's fur but not moving any more. His stomach rumbles. "Am I correct in assuming that's for me?" he asks, when Hannibal looks back at him placidly.

"I'm certainly not going to eat it," Hannibal replies.

Winston snuffles, bumping his nose beneath Will's chin, and that's as good as any signal to stand up. He does, smiling down at Winston again, then darting a glance over to Hannibal. "Does this mean we're all good?"

"Were you going to tell me you'd spoken to Abigail?"

Will's throat goes dry, so he focuses on opening the beer, wishing it had a label he could peel. "Yeah. Eventually." He takes a sip, then sets the bottle aside, goes for the fork (not plastic, it's from the kitchen) instead. As soon as he's seated, Winston sits on his feet again, chin pressed to his knee. He looks at the dog, at the burrito bowl he's mixing up, anywhere but at Hannibal.

Hannibal says nothing, waiting.

Will sighs, shovels a forkful of rice and meat and guac into his mouth, and goes through several options of what to say next. He's not finished by the time he swallows, so he eats some more.

Still no answers. Still nothing from Hannibal but a watchful presence. He washes down the food with another swig of beer, then makes himself sit back and look directly at the other

man.

“You lied to me,” Hannibal says, voice soft. “Yesterday morning in the kitchen.”

“No,” Will says, “no, I did *not* lie.”

“How else am I to take you begging me *to* lie to you, after saying she was alive and well? When you knew firsthand already?”

“I still wanted you to!” he snaps. “In that moment, in *that* context, I couldn’t handle what you were telling me. I didn’t want your honesty anymore. I didn’t want more proof that after everything that’s gone between us, *now* you actually see me as worthy of the truth.”

Hannibal’s lips part, but nothing comes out. He actually has the audacity to look surprised, like he hadn’t considered that maybe being *nice* to Will could cause this much pain.

He knew. Will *knows* he knew.

Will groans, rubs at his face, then gets down a few more bites of dinner, now sitting leaden and strange in his gut. “Look,” he says, eventually, “I didn’t feel safe. So yes, I *obfuscated* a little, and with everything else going on, clearing things up wasn’t on the top of my list.”

Then he grimaces, and adds, “I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted,” Hannibal tells him. He’s close, closer than Will thought he was a moment ago, but he doesn’t remember hearing him move. Between them, Winston whines but stays heavy against Will’s legs. Will scans Hannibal’s face, looking for anger, disappointment, *something*.

He’s missing something.

Hannibal is so difficult to read, Will thinks, frowning. If Will had to guess right this instant what was going through Hannibal’s mind, he’d say *eager anticipation* , but that makes no sense, unless perhaps he is as relieved as Will that they can pick back up where they left off, no harm done. They can, right?

Except…

Hannibal slides a hand into Will’s hair, cradling the base of his skull. Will leans back into his touch, eyelids fluttering. He’s forgetting something, and he thinks back over the conversation. Lies, trust, safety, Abigail…

But Abigail wasn’t the only betrayal.

“Miriam,” Will mumbles as it at last clicks into place. His lips are clumsy and his hands feel cold. He flinches, trying to pull away from where Hannibal’s hand burns against his scalp. They should be talking about Miriam, not Abigail, why didn’t Hannibal *ask* about Miriam-

He goes to stand up, and the room tilts.

“Careful, Will,” Hannibal says, as he pitches to one side. Winston barks, trying to stay between him and Hannibal, but Hannibal moves so fluidly, and Will can’t remember which way is up. Hannibal draws him flush against his chest, arms curling around Will so there’s no chance of him falling.

“The food?” Will manages, his voice sounding very far away. He’s confused. Floating. “You wouldn’t do that. To the food.”

Hannibal only shushes him gently. So *gently*.

“‘S not your food,” Will says after an eternity’s agonized thought. His lips quirk. He thinks he laughs. He knows Hannibal very well by now, after all.

He thinks they’re moving, but that may only be the room spinning. He closes his eyes. He thinks he could sleep for a very long time.

“Am I going to wake up?” he whispers.

And then there’s nothing.

The world is red and bright and throbbing.

Will cringes away, trying to turn his head before he fully registers that he’s awake again, but his head refuses to move. His arms refuse to move. His limbs will not obey him, and for one terrible moment, he questions whether he still *has* limbs.

But then his ankle shoots with pain as he manages an uncoordinated jerk against whatever’s holding him still.

His head is thick and swimming, and the sharp red all around him cuts into his grey matter like a rusted nail, until he realizes that *red* is the inside of his eyelids. He opens them despite the unbearable strain of it, and finds himself staring straight up into fluorescent lights.

“Hannibal?” he croaks, and his throat is tight and dry, and he wonders how long he’s been out. He’s still in the basement, and he’s eighty percent sure he’s in his bed, restraints now fully employed, dragged out into the main murder amphitheater.

It’s either that, or Hannibal has an almost-comfortable operating table.

Fuck. *Fuck*. He is suddenly more aware than he has been for the last week that he is trapped in the Chesapeake Ripper’s house, and he chose to run around with scissors instead of being calm and cooperative.

A shadow falls over him, and Will pulls his eyes away from the nearest chest of surgical implements to look up. Hannibal Lecter looms over him, backlit, expression hidden. “Welcome back, Will,” he says, voice lightly polite. Not angry, but then, he wasn’t *angry* when he set down a drugged burrito bowl, knowing Will would be too trusting (again! When did he start to trust Hannibal again?) to refuse it.

No, Hannibal doesn't *show* anger, not if he can help it.

Will wets his lips, tries to think coherently enough to figure out the best next move available to him. He doesn't have many. "It's just me," he settles on, hoping desperately that concern over how his shattered mind would interact with the sedative is why he's strapped down.

"Good," Hannibal says, and makes no attempt to loosen Will's restraints.

He does step away and turn to consider a gleaming tray of implements.

Will takes as quick an inventory of himself as he can through the throbbing of his head and the certainty that things are about to get much, much worse. He's naked except for his boxers, strapped at his wrists, ankles, neck and chest, and there's an IV going into the back of his hand. That IV is connected to a single clear bag hanging from a pole, which tells Will nothing except that he's not currently in such dire straits that he needs, say, a blood transfusion. Whatever other meds might be in his system, he couldn't say.

The room is cold. The lights are searing. He's suddenly very aware that his continued existence in Hannibal's basement is, in the end, a screaming inconvenience.

"Hannibal," he says, voice trembling. "Hannibal, let's- let's talk about this."

"About what, Will?" Hannibal asks, not turning to him. "About how you have taken advantage of my hospitality? About how you conspired with Abigail not for your own freedom or for hers, but to take my own from me?"

"None of that is true," Will says, wishing he could shake his head, wishing he could prostrate himself. (Hannibal likes his relationships operatic, doesn't he? Maybe it would help. Maybe avoiding that exact scenario is why Will is strapped down and humiliated like this.) "Let me explain. Please."

Hannibal is silent for a moment, then turns around at last. Will wishes he hadn't, because then he wouldn't be staring at the rib spreader currently held casually in one latex-gloved hand. "And why should I believe you, Will? You have every reason to want me incarcerated, we both know that. Desperate and trapped, unable to kill me yourself, you've instead been given all the evidence you could need to capture the great Chesapeake Ripper. You only lacked the ability to tell the outside world. And then that, too, drops into your lap."

He's not wrong, is the problem; this is what Will *should* have done. He's thought about it over and over again, in bits and pieces, fits and starts. And even when he was on the phone with Abigail, he'd come very close to doing exactly what Hannibal accused him of.

But he *didn't*. He didn't, and he has been at war with himself over that failure every minute of every day, and just that morning he'd thought he'd finally won. Kissing Hannibal had been…

Well. There's no point in thinking about it, not now.

He swallows, thickly, and looks Hannibal up and down, trying to gauge what his next move will be. He's shed his jacket, his waistcoat, and his tie, but he's still in the same shirt and

slacks; Will can even see some of Winston's fur caught in the twill weave. Which means he hasn't bothered changing, which means both that Will couldn't have been out for long and that Hannibal is *upset*.

Hannibal feels like he's lost control of the situation, and doesn't have time to reassert it with a costume change.

He's hurting.

Hannibal sets the rib spreader aside and approaches the bed, and this time, the light isn't entirely behind him, so Will can make out his expression. Can see the furious rage battling the pain in his eyes as he threads a hand into Will's hair, seemingly uncertain of whether he wants to drag Will's head back until it hurts, or cradle it with affection.

"I let you know me," Hannibal says, the words nearly catching in his throat. "See me. I gave you sanctuary and aid, bared my belly to you."

"And I didn't betray you," Will says, putting every ounce of his conviction into his voice. *Believe me*, he wants to beg. *Believe me, or it'll be just like I'm back in the BSHCI again, except this time nobody will be left to care what happens to me*.

The realization hits him hard; he's unprepared for it, and feels his body jerk with a shocked sob. He struggles to breathe around it, even as Hannibal settles a gloved hand on his chest.

"Abigail is gone," Hannibal says.

Will's eyes burn with unshed, unwanted tears. "What?" he asks, brow furrowing, unable to track what he means. *Gone*? Dead? Killed, truly killed, in retaliation? But he wasn't out that long, and Hannibal looks…

Looks resigned. *Oh, god*. Hannibal thinks this is proof that Will orchestrated his final victory. Abigail gone, fled, out of Hannibal's reach now, and no, Will didn't intend that.

"She's her own person," he says, searching Hannibal's face. "If she left, she left because she wanted to. She called you for help. I only- I just-"

"What will Ms. Katz and her cohort find?" Hannibal says, cutting him off. His fingers are feeling out the lines of his ribs, and then Hannibal lets go of his hair with his other hand and instead reaches for a scalpel, already nearby, at the ready.

"Nothing!" Will shouts, trying to flinch away, unable to move. "Nothing that isn't already there, unless Abigail didn't work clean. The lures- the lures will only exonerate me, you *made* them for that-"

Hannibal doesn't frown, or smile, or emote in any way as he calmly traces the edge of Will's fifth rib. The pain follows on a lag, the scalpel so sharp he doesn't feel his flesh part.

He does feel blood slick his skin.

“Jesus, Hannibal!” he hisses. “If I wanted you caught I would’ve been a *lot* more obvious about it, don’t you think?”

“I think,” Hannibal says as he deepens the cut, and this time Will feels it, feels the tips of Hannibal’s fingers probing into his flesh, “that if you had been any more obvious, Jack would have known it couldn’t have been the Ripper at work. Just like our friend Matthew Brown’s bullet.”

“Miriam Lass-”

“Would be hard to explain away, but Jack believes you are alive and free, and that you want nothing more than to prove to him that I am a killer.” Hannibal pauses, taking his hands away from Will’s skin. “What a twist it would be for him, that you could find Miriam after all this time, then use her to point the finger at me. The question, if Jack still assumed that I was innocent and you were delusionally obsessive, would then become whether would you let the actual Ripper walk free just to entrap me. Jack might still have that much faith in you, that you would never do such a thing, that he’d take this as the proof it really is.”

Will’s head hurts nearly as much as his chest. “I promise you that I’m nowhere near that complex,” he says, panting against the pain. “Listen to me, Hannibal. Abigail called me for help. Miriam was already dead. I just didn’t want her to- to go to *waste*.”

Hannibal frowns, and doesn’t interrupt him.

“If Miriam disappeared entirely, Jack would never find closure, and he *would* eventually find you. You’ll slip up one day, like you did with Miriam in the first place. If Miriam simply turned up dead of a head injury, then two years of keeping her alive would be meaningless, without- without *artistry* . I couldn’t let either option happen.”

“And so you had Abigail butcher her, and arrange the meat to exonerate you of the copycat crimes.”

“With the lures, which you would have done anyway. And the rest...” He winces. “That was meant as mockery,” he admits, “and as a hint to Jack about the Ripper’s nature, but *not* a way to point him in your direction. He didn’t even believe me that the Copycat and the Ripper were the same man, Hannibal”

“He does now,” Hannibal says. “And he will realize soon enough that you cannot be either, and I will still be trapped here, unable to act freely to protect myself.” He considers Will a moment longer, then turns away, goes back to retrieve the rib spreader.

Will jerks against his bonds, whining in pain as the movement tears the cut in his side open even more. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I’m sorry! I thought- I thought it would just annoy you, not *hurt* you.”

Hannibal’s knuckles go white as he grips the spreader a little harder than Will thinks he means to. No, he doesn’t want that hurt being pointed out. That vulnerability.

“Hannibal,” Will says, more softly now, less desperately. “Hannibal, please.”

“You could have told Abigail to wait,” Hannibal says after a moment. “Allowed me to deal with her. Trusted that I would care for you both. And instead you have put a snare around my neck, inadvertent or not, and you have lost her for both of us.”

“I told her we were working together,” Will says. *I also told her to take care of herself*. But he hadn’t meant for her to run.

Had he?

Maybe she’ll come back. Maybe she’s just terrified.

Maybe she’s smarter than he is.

“I’m sorry,” Will repeats, and feels stupid even as he says it, both because this is, ultimately, all Hannibal’s fault, and because he really is sorry. Sorry that his entirely reasonable actions based on what he knew two days ago no longer match the reality that he wants for himself.

Hannibal gazes down at him, implacable. “And the kiss?” he asks, after a moment. “Were you attempting to manipulate me for your own safety, or was that simply your latest clutch for balance?”

(A corner of Will’s mind hysterically whispers *you’re very kissable*.)

“I kissed you,” Will says, throat tightening, “because I didn’t want to resist anymore.”

Blood still slides down Will’s skin. It’s growing tacky and cold. His chest shivers with pain, with emotion, with raw need.

For just a moment, it looks as if Hannibal will kill him right then, end this livewire tightrope, close off the hurt that Will feels ricocheting between the two of them. And then, for just a moment, it looks as if Hannibal will instead bend down to lap the blood from his chest.

He does neither, because from across the room, there comes the sound of a door opening. Not the trap door, but the front door, the noise faithfully and quietly reproduced by one of the screens. *The security detail*, Will thinks, wildly. Of course. Of course! Here to ruin everything, when he really can’t afford-

(What?

For Hannibal to slaughter them all?)

-to have Hannibal distracted from him.

But no matter how much he wants to, Will cannot make them leave by force of outrage alone. Hannibal goes very still with the same realization, and then he draws away, tossing the rib spreader aside and stripping off his gloves. He doesn’t spare a single glance back at Will as he goes to the stairs.

He’s going to leave him here, strapped to the bed.

“Hannibal!” he hisses. “Hannibal, let me go!”

Hannibal pauses for just a moment, glances back and works his jaw. He reaches for the trap door.

“Either kill me or let me go, Hannibal!” Will shouts, a little louder, because that keeps Hannibal from leaving for another moment. Hannibal’s eyes blaze, Will can see it even from where he is, can *feel* it on him. “I’m yours until one of us dies, Hannibal, and you have to *choose*.”

Hannibal’s upper lip curls in a snarl. Will hears the faintest sound of scratching, Winston pacing up in the pantry, and there are boots in Hannibal’s hallway now.

“Get some rest,” Hannibal says, finally. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

And then he’s gone, and Will barely has the presence of mind to wait until the door is closed again to thrash against the unyielding pressure of his restraints and scream.

Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Hannibal sits before him, unconscious but just starting to stir, bound tightly to a liberated dining room chair. Will doesn't remember incapacitating him, or dragging him down from the bedroom, or binding him so carefully, but obviously it all happened. Will's in pain, though he's fairly certain that's from getting himself loose earlier, not any kind of violent altercation. (His shoulder won't stop throbbing, and he wishes he had a sling, even if it's not quite to dislocated-and-reset levels of pain. His left thumb, however, is exactly as fucked as it was when he escaped police custody the first time - which is impressive, given that he must have had to do it without the help of his other hand.)

He also has a note in his own handwriting. It reads:

You'll have about ten minutes from the time you wake up before the drugs wear off.

Have fun.

Will intends to. For a given value of fun, at any rate.

--

Will gets himself free. This conversation isn't over until he says he is.

(This is @chaotic_plotter's favorite chapter. You know what that means - buckle the fuck up.)

Hours pass.

First, Will listens to Hannibal arguing with the security detail over the surveillance screen speakers, catching every other word at most thanks to how far away they are. He thinks he hears Hannibal claim that he and Winston are both in the pantry so that Winston can decompress from the day, and that he'd lost track of the time. It makes sense, mostly, but it doesn't sound like the security detail believes him, and there's a brief period where Will thinks the trap door will open any minute to reveal him shivering and splayed.

It doesn't.

Then, Will listens to the subtler sounds: Hannibal closing the front door, murmuring words Will can't make out to his dog, setting down a dish of what must be store-bought dog food from the sound of kibble cascading into the bowl and the crack of a wet food can. (Of course Alana was feeding store-bought; he can't really blame her for that. And it's not like Hannibal has had time to do the cooking, even if Will assumes - *hopes* - he's already done the

research.) After a few minutes of silence, Will hears Winston begin to eat, but it's slow, halting. Unsure.

Good boy, Will thinks, even as he tugs at his restraints.

Hannibal will be back any minute. He's sure of that. With the security detail sent back out to the street and the yard, Hannibal will come down as soon as he's able, and either kill Will (though, honestly, Will's ninety percent sure that's not how things are trending) or let him go. Or at least sedate him again. But time creeps on, Winston finishes eating, and though Will can't see the screens, he can hear Hannibal ascending the stairs. He can hear the rush of a shower, along with the kick of the pipes closer by. He can even hear the soft rustle of sheets as Hannibal-

Goes to sleep.

He can't sleep, and he can't move more than twitching his fingers and toes. Even with how long he's been tied up (or, more likely, *because* of how long he's been tied up), he might actually lose his mind if he has to stay like this another minute. He feels perched on the edge of another panic attack, too aware of how defenseless he is. How trapped. Every inch of him screams that he needs to find somewhere close and small and *safe*, where he can protect himself when Hannibal comes back.

If Hannibal comes back.

In the morning.

(*Hannibal wakes up earlier than you do*, his mind supplies, unhelpfully. *You'll eventually pass out and then you won't be conscious when he returns, and just think of what he could get up to*.)

The cut in his side itches. Aches. Hannibal didn't even have time (or inclination) to stitch him back up. Groaning, Will fights the restraints again, and again they do not give.

He needs to piss.

Hannibal didn't plan this, he tries to tell himself. And sure, no, Hannibal hadn't *intended* to leave him like this, but once it was done, he clearly had no problem with it. Otherwise, he'd be down here, not sleeping peacefully upstairs. Will bares his teeth, thrashes a bit more, and manages to get his head turned far enough to one side that he can see-

The black screen of the laptop.

His reflection gazes back at him.

He looks, objectively, terrible. Not just pathetic and frightened, but also exhausted and *shattered*. His eyes are wide, his expression perfectly suited for some slasher flick poster. He closes his eyes against the evidence of his current situation, then thinks a moment, and cracks one eye back open.

Will licks one chapped lip and squints at his reflection. He slowly sculpts his expression into something less reasonable for the situation and more confident. Amused, even.

He's not asleep, but maybe-

Maybe this could work.

"I need you to get me out of these restraints," he says. His voice is strained and halting. He feels ridiculous, saying this out loud, when it's not like his reflection can speak.

But his own voice can.

"And why should I listen to you?"

"Because we want the same things. Sometimes. Now."

His reflection quirks a brow. "And?"

"And I'm better suited to being your handler than *he* is," he snaps, without thinking.

His reflection turns thoughtful, and Will isn't sure if that's him, or- well, him. "I can get you out of this. I could get him for you, too, you know," he hears himself say, *feels* himself say. The words don't feel alien at all, but they also don't feel like he's just talking to himself. It's very similar to when he narrates the mindset of a killer, a liminal sensation where the words are his and not his.

In the reflection, Will sees himself smiling. "Turnabout is fair play," his mirror image adds.

"Don't hurt him," Will says, perhaps too quickly, but who's here to hear it but him?

"I would *never*," his reflection simpers. Then he grins. "That's more of a *you* thing these days."

There's a very strong chance he's hallucinating right now, or asleep, or otherwise not actually being insulted (*teased*, really) by his own CIA-manufactured alter-ego. Still, whatever he is, he's not wrong.

"I just want to finish our conversation," he says, summoning all his self control. "And I'd prefer not to be tied down for it. But security's fired up and unreliable, so you probably shouldn't try anything too elaborate."

"*We* are quite capable of judging risk," he tells himself. "You know, Will, you worry too much."

And then the world goes dark.

Hannibal's kitchen is very much like how he dreamed it.

It's some indeterminate time in the early morning, before the sun has even begun to rise but too far gone to be considered *night* anymore, really. The blinds are firmly down, but there's enough refracted street light coming in from the small window by the pantry door to see by, along with the spillover from the un-blocked dining room windows one room away. There's also a small light above the stove that Will chooses to believe was left on by Hannibal, and so won't draw any outside attention to…

Well.

Hannibal sits before him, unconscious but just starting to stir, bound tightly to a liberated dining room chair. Will doesn't remember incapacitating him, or dragging him down from the bedroom, or binding him so carefully, but obviously it all happened. Will's in pain, though he's fairly certain that's from getting himself loose earlier, not any kind of violent altercation. (His shoulder won't stop throbbing, and he wishes he had a sling, even if it's not quite to dislocated-and-reset levels of pain. His left thumb, however, is exactly as fucked as it was when he escaped police custody the first time - which is impressive, given that he must have had to do it without the help of his other hand.)

He also has a note in his own handwriting. It reads:

You'll have about ten minutes from the time you wake up before the drugs wear off.

Have fun.

Will intends to. For a given value of *fun*, at any rate.

He keeps his movements limited. He's used up about half of his allotted prep time just finding the note and considering, but now he knows exactly what he's going to do. He checks the fridge, retrieves a few items, then slinks into the pantry, carefully avoiding the line of sight afforded by the little window. Winston is resting by the trap door and lifts his head for just a moment as Will enters, then goes back to sleep when Will smiles and steps around him. In the little pantry fridge, just like he'd hoped, there are a few vacuum-packed cuts of meat. (There had been plenty in the freezer, but none defrosted already in the kitchen fridge, and Will has to keep this quick.)

While there's a slight chance the kidney he selects is from a pig, Will thinks not.

He returns to the kitchen, where he slits the plastic and dumps the organ out onto a cutting board, prodding it gently with a knuckle. Still quite cold, likely just defrosted. It would have probably found its way into at least Hannibal's breakfast this morning.

Will thinks his idea is better.

Two minutes later, Will hears Hannibal's breathing change. It's subtle, still slow and deep, but the tenor is just a little different. He gives the man another minute or so to get his bearings, and is both gratified and slightly concerned not to hear him test his bonds.

He'd really like to know they're going to hold, before he gets started, but he'll just have to trust the CIA's training.

“I figured you probably hadn’t gotten a chance to eat dinner,” Will says, glancing over his aching shoulder as he whisks eggs into a serviceable froth. He braces the bowl against his belly with his forearm - it hurts a little less that way. “What with tonight’s audience.”

Hannibal does not, thankfully, continue pretending that he’s asleep. He opens his eyes and regards Will steadily.

“This is extremely risky,” he says, after a moment’s consideration. No thank you, but no rage in his voice, either. More concern. A little interest. A dash of warning. “If somebody sees you-”

“Then they’ll break the door in and find Will Graham, psychopath, has you hostage. They’ll drag me off to jail or possibly even kill me on the spot. Of course, given my ingredients, they’ll come to the conclusion that I really am somehow the Ripper and you are but a helpless victim.” Will pauses, shrugs. “*Or*, they’ll put two and two together and figure out neither of us is innocent anymore. Do you have a preference?”

Hannibal’s lip twitches toward a snarl. Point made.

“And am I speaking to Will Graham, psychopath, or Will Graham, CIA asset?”

This question, Will thinks, finally has a less than obvious answer. This is the closest he’s ever felt to the confidence on that video recording, but unlike the other night in the closet, he’s not even approaching the hazy boundary between his personae. His mind is all his own. He feels... clear.

“Is this from the muralist, or some other hapless victim?” Will asks, instead of answering directly, pointing with his elbow to the kidney on the cutting board to the left of Hannibal’s seat. It’s just barely within Hannibal’s range of vision; he has to strain against the ropes and zipties keeping him in place. “You should improve your system; it was the only item without a label. Wasn’t too hard to figure out that it must be from your special collection. Sloppy, Hannibal.”

That earns him a glare. Will smiles.

“Everything in the freezer is currently wrapped in paper,” Hannibal points out. “And one hardly needs a code to tell them that’s a kidney.” His eyes narrow as he takes in the bowl in Will’s grip and the several vegetables laid out on a separate cutting board. “Is this to be something of a last meal, then?”

“I can’t kill you, Hannibal. Don’t you remember?”

“Not unless I am no longer your handler. How is your reintegration going, Will?”

Will's smile grows. “I may have had another breakthrough,” he confesses, setting the bowl down and turning to face Hannibal fully, leaning back against the counter. “I’d say this is a... team effort. Are you afraid?”

Hannibal regards him coolly, though his jaw works a little, muscles shifting in agitation. “I certainly don’t feel safe,” he says, finally.

Will wonders if their radical honesty accord still holds. *Probably*, he thinks, then, *yes*. And that probably means, in turn, that Hannibal doesn’t anticipate getting loose without help anytime soon.

That still leaves him dangerous, but Will can work with that.

“Good,” Will says. “Then we’re on even footing again, after tonight.” His hand brushes almost idly against where, below his shirt, a bandage is taped over the cut in his side. Hannibal sees it, and doesn’t offer so much as a chagrined smile, let alone an apology.

That’s about what he expected. Will doesn’t take it as personally as maybe he should, but he does at least acknowledge it, to himself, as he makes his way over to the cutting board with the kidney.

It puts him within arms reach of Hannibal but, of course, Hannibal doesn’t *have* the reach right now. He could still try to tilt the chair over.

(He doesn’t.)

Instead, Hannibal watches him, silent, appraising, no doubt weighing just how afraid to be.

Will picks up a knife, then regards the kidney, frowning.

“Is something the matter?” Hannibal asks.

“Just realizing I’ve only ever handled these in anatomy labs and autopsies.” He turns his upper body to face Hannibal, posture welcoming, not defensive at all. “Care to help? I’d hate to screw this up, after the gourmet meals you’ve been treating me to this week.”

Hannibal’s expression goes blank, and Will can’t tell if it’s out of short-circuited confusion or tested patience. But then Hannibal inclines his head. “Pull off the membrane and exterior fat deposits first,” he advises. “Then you’ll want to trim out the remainder of the ureter. I recommend placing it on the cutting board so that the ureter is facing towards you, then cutting the kidney in half lengthwise to expose the internal structure. Anything that isn’t the cortex should be removed.”

That’s straightforward enough. He’s nowhere near as confident as Hannibal is when he cooks, but he makes a decent show of it. Off with the outer bits with the help of the knife tip, and then he’s exposed the interior and…

This is a lot less straightforward than the diagram of renal anatomy he remembers. The throb in his thumb and the low lighting aren't helping, either. His brow furrows as he makes the most obvious cuts, but getting *under* the renal pyramids turns out to be tricky and, while not as slippery as gutting a fish, a lot less *obvious*.

Hannibal watches him struggle, then licks at his lower lip. “Let me-”

"*No*." He makes quick work of the rest of the trimming, just so that Hannibal can't offer again. Yes, Hannibal could no doubt do a much better job of this, but that's hardly the point.

What's left of the kidney cortex is a sorry mess of brown flesh. He cuts it into a rough chop. It really could be any other meat, at this point, though it does smell…

Well. Like a kidney.

He clears his cutting board of the scrap, which helps a little, and then he glances at Hannibal. "Anything else I need to do before I cook it?" he asks.

"Soak it in milk for several hours," Hannibal says, voice carefully bland.

Will goes to get a bowl. "Wish I'd known that before cracking the eggs, but I suppose we can entertain ourselves until sunrise."

Hannibal watches as he retrieves the milk, next, and only when he's just about to pour (and he *is* about to pour, starting to wonder if maybe this really is an unavoidable part of offal preparation) does Hannibal say, "Or, if you're confident in your trimming job, fifteen minutes in a mixture of two cups water to one tablespoon vinegar and two tablespoons of salt will do the job."

Figured, Will doesn't say. He does say, "Thanks for the tip," and goes to do just that.

"Would you care to tell me why I'm your captive audience?" Hannibal asks, finally, after Will has set aside the soaking kidney and moved on to an array of vegetables.

"Simple," he says. "Because this conversation isn't over until I say it is."

"And what conversation is that?"

"The one you started earlier tonight." He pries a few garlic cloves free of the head. "About honesty. Intentions." A pause as he works his thumbnail into the paper. "How I have every reason to hate you, *despite* your flawless hospitality."

Hannibal twitches in his bonds. He hasn't bothered hiding the dark viciousness inside him, but it flares into something hotter now. Will gazes back into the Chesapeake Ripper's eyes, unflinching.

"None of what I told you down there was a lie, Hannibal," he says, leaning his hip against the counter. "Jack isn't about to bust down your door at my design. I may have made a mistake in how I handled Abigail, but it was not done out of malice."

Will waits until Hannibal flicks his gaze away at last, and Will turns to resume peeling garlic. "But," he says, "that leaves a *lot* unsaid."

"Speak, then," Hannibal says, and it sounds almost like a snarl. "Say your piece."

"And you'll listen? To every word of it?"

“When have I ever not?”

Will can’t help his smile. “Point,” he muses, chopping the garlic fine but uneven. “And I suppose I can’t demand that you *care*. That was always the problem, after all. You drank up every word I said. You took them so wholly for yourself that the damage done to me was meaningless.”

It’s strange, speaking like this, so openly, and so *focused*. Not as a distraction from a more urgent, immediate truth, and not just as a quick recapitulation to make sure they’re both caught up to the rules of the game.

“Given enough time,” he continues, moving on to a handful of mushrooms, “in another world, where you sprung me from the BSHCI yourself, I likely would have forgiven you. I certainly wouldn't have been able to stay away. A slow burn of intimacy, of immersion into your world, and I’d have made sense of things in a much more organic matter. But, despite both of our desires, that’s not what happened.”

Will smiles. It has teeth. “My vengeance has been taken from me,” he says. “I was allowed to see the shape of what you’d done to me, feel the betrayal, the rage, the devastation, and then, instead of getting to work through any of it, let *alone* make good on my promise of a reckoning, the entire set and genre of the play I was in was changed on me abruptly, without consent, or pause, or escape. I have been *forced* into trusting you, relying on you, and you’ve had the unmitigated gall to actually earn that trust. Do you have any idea how incredibly frustrating that is? How disorienting?”

“It’s not what I would have chosen for you,” Hannibal says.

“That’s not what I asked.” He glances up from the bell pepper he’s now dismantling. His jaw feels much tighter than he’d like. For all his command of the situation, it’s hard to organize the chaos in his belly into words. Vulnerable, terrible words, not drawn out in a moment of crisis but in a moment of almost-calm. “I asked if you can, for just a moment, imagine what it is to *be* me. Be Will Graham for just a moment again. Mimic me.”

Hannibal clenches his jaw. He looks over the length of Will’s body. “I can enumerate the wild and varied emotions I believe you to be feeling,” he says, slowly. “But I suspect that won’t be enough for you.”

Will shakes his head. “No. Not really.” He finishes with the bell pepper and considers the knife in his hand. It is sharp. It is heavy. There are any number of things he could do to Hannibal right now with it, and Hannibal is powerless to stop him.

Will comes to stand before him, their knees almost touching.

“I want you,” he says, resting the flat of the blade on Hannibal’s shoulder, the edge just against his throat, “to *see* me. To go beyond understanding. To *know*.” He shifts, the blade catching Hannibal’s flesh.

It bites in. Blood wells along the steel. Hannibal doesn’t flinch, but he does stiffen. Will can hear him shift against his bonds.

Will could kill him now.

He sees the moment Hannibal realizes it.

Hannibal lifts his chin, lips parting slightly. “You’re far beyond what I could have imagined, Will,” he says. There is a storm behind his words. Adoration and curiosity mixed with anger and terror. He doesn’t appreciate vulnerability. “And far more dangerous than I gave you credit for.”

“Only because *you* can’t kill *me*,” Will says, and pulls the knife away. “Did you realize that, before tonight? Or was that one more in a long line of unpleasant surprises?”

There’s one moment of blank stillness, and then Hannibal snarls and jerks forward in the seat, as if to tear him open with his teeth.

Will steps back, grinning cruelly.

“Don’t tell me you’ve *just* figured it out,” Will says, even as he grabs up the bowl of kidney and drains it, fingers caging in the slivers of organ. “Either we’re in this together or one of us isn’t leaving this house alive. If it’s going to be the latter, I wonder which one of us will overcome our sentiments first.”

“Is it an apology you’re after?” Hannibal asks, even as he fights his bonds with vigor now. The chair thuds against the floor as Will rinses the kidney one more time, then puts it in an oiled pan and turns on the heat.

“Depends,” Will says. “Are you offering an apology for drugging me, or for abandoning me like a discarded toy?”

“For our *safety*,” Hannibal hisses.

“So... neither?” He sidesteps Hannibal’s struggling form to add the vegetables to the bowl of whisked egg, then returns to the stove. “You realize that during my escape from the BSHCI, I was mimicking you, right? That my other self, when faced with what you’d done to us, realized you were also our best chance of freedom.”

That makes Hannibal go still, if only to see where Will is going now, and more quietly test his bonds.

Will glances over his shoulder as he stirs the sliced kidney. Blood has soaked into the collar of Hannibal’s pajamas thanks to all the exertion, and there’s a thin sheen of sweat on his forehead. “You should be proud of me, you know. I really am making progress. I was in my right mind when I spoke to Abigail, and while I mimicked you again, it was a conscious decision that time, and I… elaborated. No longer just copying the master.”

“Am I to congratulate you?”

“It felt good,” Will tells him, and oh, but the conflict in Hannibal’s eyes is delicious. Will has to exert effort to turn back to the stove and add the eggs to the pan. “Powerful. Elegant. It gave me a unique insight into you. Into us.”

“And then you attacked me.”

Will remembers the closet and smiles down at the pan. “I simply reminded us both that neither of us are ever going to be tame. I know you enjoyed it; we’re beyond the point where you can lie to me.”

He waits for protest. This is where Hannibal will divulge any remaining deceit. But nothing comes, just softly labored breaths. Will prods the eggs with a spatula.

“Then take your vengeance,” Hannibal says, finally, as the eggs grow opaque. “You’ve used what I awoke in you to at last gain the upper hand. You’ve risked discovery for it. We cannot come back from this, not as we were.”

“No,” Will agrees. He lets the eggs brown just a little, then cuts the heat. Rummages for a dish. “None of what you did is justified, in my view. But... this is where we are. Alone without each other.”

He turns to Hannibal. Finds him staring, the monster fully unwrapped, familiar to the core of him.

“We’re tangled up so tightly that we may not survive the separation. At least, not yet. Not now.”

Hannibal frowns. Searches his face for some answer, some explanation, and seemingly comes up empty.

Will cants his head. “Telling Abigail what to do with Miriam Lass was the one and only time since I entered this house that I was able to, in some way, act instead of react to something *you’ve* presented to me. I did it to stake a claim. And you felt so betrayed by it that you drugged me. Cut me open. Considered killing me, just to staunch the pain of it. Tell me, Dr. Lecter, just how afraid of rejection *are* you?”

Hannibal’s expression cracks.

It’s not conflicted, not anymore, and there is no trace of anger left. He looks *wounded*, utterly wounded, and Will bears witness to it.

He waits. This is not a rhetorical question, and he can see the strain in Hannibal’s throat as he realizes it.

“From you?” Hannibal rasps. His voice and accent are thick, clinging, clotting.

Will nods.

Hannibal’s throat bobs on a reflexive swallow as he confesses:

“Abjectly terrified.”

Will looks away, plates their breakfast. By the time he turns back around, he knows his own cruel smile has settled into something much simpler, much quieter.

Hannibal's gaze darts between Will's patient expression and the dish in his hand. The dish filled with protein scramble studded with bits of human kidney. Filled with food, sustenance, willingly prepared. For him.

"I see you," Will says, softly. He closes the last distance between them and, without hesitating, lowers himself into Hannibal's lap, sitting astride his thighs. "And whatever got me to this moment, I'm not turning away."

Will doesn't know what happened to Hannibal, somewhere in the guarded wilds of his past, but he knows food played a part. Food, and *hunger*. He knows that for Hannibal, going to bed unsated must have been a Herculean effort, only possible because it was safest - for him *and* for Will.

And if they are together in this, then Will is going to feed that hunger.

Hannibal's lips part, his breath hitching. His eyes shine in the low light of the kitchen. Will quirks a brow and gathers up a forkful of egg and kidney, and offers it to him.

Hannibal doesn't look away from him as he eats.

Will takes the next bite.

Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

“You don't tell me until it's too late,” he whispers, staring at the researcher looming over him. “Not until I am medicated and disoriented. Then you tell me you intend to fracture my psyche. You saw my suggestibility, my flexibility, and decided to revive some old protocols. Your aim is just to make a docile, obedient version of me, accessible with the right triggers. But you don’t know how much danger you’re in.” He swallows, shakes his head. “You don’t see it.”

A syringe slides into the IV. The researcher depresses the plunger. Repeats the process again, and again, and again.

The world melts.

--

The final pieces of the puzzle slot into place. Will makes plans for the future.

(This chapter is *also* my beta @chaotic_plotter's favorite, because- well. You'll see!)

Will regards himself in the mirror.

He’s back in the basement. Has been for a few hours now, though he hasn’t been able to sleep, not even with the bed wheeled back into his bedroom. But his belly is full, some light painkillers are taking the worst of the edge off his shoulder and thumb, and his mind is more settled than it’s been in days, and this is as good a time as any to try profiling himself again.

Hannibal, Will knows, is stealing a brief early-morning nap. He’d watched on the screens as Hannibal climbed into bed, lingered long enough to see his breathing even out. He’d wanted, more than anything, to be up there with him, but-

Well. The security detail is still a problem. *All* of this is still a problem, really, regardless of what understandings they might have come to, sharing a bowl of human protein scramble in the quiet hours of the night.

(What those understandings are remain a little nebulous. They hadn’t spoken much, after Will’s vow. They’d eaten, and they’d breathed each other’s air, and they hadn’t kissed, because Will hadn’t wanted to cheapen the moment. When the dish was empty, Will had unbound Hannibal, and Hannibal hadn’t retaliated, and they’d faced each other across the kitchen island. Hannibal had still been at a loss for words, raw and open. Will had almost said

something, but then he'd gotten a glimpse of the time. He'd smiled, and pet Winston, and put himself away into the basement, the monster retreating to his shadowed lair. Overall, he's happy with how things turned out.)

They'll talk later today, Will's sure of it, and in the meantime…

"Funny seeing you here," he says, and his reflection is only his own vaguely embarrassed smile. He considers a moment, then cuts the lights, the better to approximate the strange black mirror of the laptop.

Nothing changes. But then, he's starting to think that nothing needs to change, not really.

"Ground rules," he says, to himself, "now that we seem to agree that *I'm* in charge, not Hannibal. If I black out this time, we stay in the basement. No field trips. I *want* to be down here right now."

There's no answer. He's not sure if that's a good sign or a bad sign. Could go either way, really.

He takes a deep breath, closes his eyes, and lets the pendulum swing.

When he opens his eyes, he is in a space far more institutional than Hannibal Lecter's murder basement. The lights are poorer quality, though frustratingly bright. The floor is over-waxed linoleum. He is looking into another mirror, and he is much younger than he knows himself to be.

He is also not alone.

There are a few men behind him. None wear anything so obvious as lab coats or uniforms, but he can recognize by bearing and other, subtler cues which are researchers and which are CIA brass. This is a simulacrum of the past, half-memory and half-extrapolation, and one that he cannot change the plot of by acting off-script, so he pays them little mind and returns his attention to himself.

He's maybe twenty, if that. Before he graduated college, definitely, if his haircut and the complete lack of a beard is anything to go by. He swapped to constant-stubble very soon after entering the police academy, because even though he'd been older than a lot of the new recruits, he certainly hadn't looked it. That and his accelerated bachelors' degree had set him uncomfortably apart from the rest.

(The beard hadn't actually helped, but he wound up preferring it all the same.)

"I am selected during a psychological study I volunteer for in my final year of college," he tells himself, feeling out the truth of it as he speaks the words. His audience doesn't look up. "I don't like it when people poke around in my head, but I need the cash. It is in the course of that study that one of the assisting faculty takes note of my *unique* tendencies towards empathy and analysis and submits my information to a colleague of his at the CIA. They don't hide any of this from me at the time."

That last detail gives him pause, and he turns at last from the mirror. *Why did I say yes?* he wonders, silently. He tries to fit his thought patterns back to his younger self, and finds-

Finds a wall. Not impenetrable, more of a thicket, but pushing through it takes up all his attention. *Not money*, he registers, dimly. No, something much farther down, buried under layer and layer of defense.

“I thought they’d seen something nobody else had,” he tests. His chest tightens. His pulse speeds. “I *wanted* them to have seen something. Because I knew it was there. I thought they’d put me somewhere safe.”

(Safe? For *whom*?)

He stares down at his hands, and sees filth beneath the nails. Spreading, oozing darkness, gritty and thick and slimy. “No, no, I don’t want to see this,” he says. He closes his eyes, tries to call up the pendulum.

Strong hands seize his upper arms.

“Let go!” he snarls, eyes flying open, but he’s not standing in some nondescript room anymore. He’s in a chair not very far removed from the one Chilton had strapped him to in the BSHCI, though there are even more restraints on this one. They’re all cinched tight. Around him is a retrofitted hotel, made into a prison. Somebody inserts a needle into his arm.

“You don't tell me until it's too late,” he whispers, staring at the researcher looming over him. “Not until I am medicated and disoriented. Then you tell me you intend to fracture my psyche. You saw my suggestibility, my *flexibility*, and decided to revive some old protocols. Your aim is just to make a docile, obedient version of me, accessible with the right triggers. But you don’t know how much danger you’re in.” He swallows, shakes his head. “You don’t see it.”

A syringe slides into the IV. The researcher depresses the plunger. Repeats the process again, and again, and again.

The world melts.

Only the barest fraction of Will Graham remembers that this is reconstruction. That this is memory. That this isn’t *real*, not right now, that his brain isn’t drowning underneath LSD and ketamine and god knows what else they’re pumping into him. The rest of him is sobbing, thrashing, trying desperately to escape. To hide. He wants to hide. He *needs* to hide.

The sound of hoofbeats flows over him.

“My name is Will Graham,” he rasps, the words flitting away from him like a swarm of insects. “It is- it is just after dawn, I’m in- I’m in-”

I don’t know where I am-

“Baltimore, Maryland-”

They're going to see. They're going to see.

"And I am going to wake up!"

No.

Not yet.

Hide. Hide. ***Hide****.*

He can't hide. The straps cut into him, and lights flash in front of his eyes. He screams. He screams even as the hoofbeats get closer, as hot, peppery breath gusts across his cheek. He doesn't know how much time is passing. Days? Weeks? Or only minutes? But the lights keep flashing and the world keeps melting and the pitch-black stag with raven's feathers that came to him as his brain boiled in his skull is here, staring down at him, nudging at his hands.

His hands.

His blood-soaked, filthy hands, but no, that's not right, he's never killed anybody, not yet, not *yet-*

But it was always going to be a matter of time.

"I thought you knew," Will whispered, voice hoarse from screaming. The features of the researcher in front of him twist, distort. He can't find the eyes. Fitting, since they never saw him, not really.

"Picture a pendulum," a voice tells him. *This is a memory*, he thinks. The lights go out, and he sees only the golden shine of the *real* pendulum, and he hopes now, finally, he'll wake up.

He doesn't.

"You break me," Will whispers. "You fumble around in my brain, you move all the furniture around, but you have no idea what you're doing. You miss the point completely. You only make me suffer." He can barely breathe through his sobs, and the words are indistinct, but it's okay. Nobody's listening. "You don't cause the fracture in my awareness, do you?"

The pendulum is replaced by a mirror.

At first, it's the stag that stares back at him. But then it is only Will, shuddering towards a breakdown, brain on fire. Broken, but not yet laid bare, not entirely. He has spent so many years fighting down the darkness inside of him, and it writhes just beneath his skin.

"If you let me go," Will tells his unhearing audience, "I will kill all of you."

Six dead at the BSHCI.

Chilton strapped to the chair, an IV running into the meat of his tongue.

"So I do the only thing I can."

The straps are gone. The chair is gone. He reaches out and touches his own face in the mirror, then flattens his hand, covering one half of his reflection. “I partition myself. I give you what you want to save you from what I would do. I make a version of myself that can be controlled. And then give *him* my darkness, my viciousness, the violence that lives just below my skin.” He feels the loss of it, the tearing, but it is good. It is *relief*. For a few years, at least, he thinks that he is normal.

That he is safe.

“We both get what we want out of the arrangement, you and I. You, undeserving as you are, unknowing of how you managed it, get a biddable creature that can be commanded to kill. It doesn’t take long for the more blood-soaked side of your agency to realize the opportunity I’ve handed them, for them to take ownership of me, train me, turn me into a willing weapon. And all the while, I get to pretend that I can only think like a killer, not be one.”

He smiles. His face trembles. He is holding on by the barest thread, but he has *won* .

“This,” he whispers, half-slurred, “is my design.”

He comes back to himself in the shower.

The dial is turned to the hottest setting, but the water is only tepid. His hair is plastered to his scalp, his clothing heavy and clinging. There are red weals down his arms where he has scratched his skin open, but while the water keeps them from scabbing, the blood flows only sluggishly.

His face aches from crying, and he is so tired he’s not sure he can stand.

He doesn’t bother trying. Every twitch of his eyes brings back another scrap, another fragment, cascading across his synapses like the sleet of an ice storm.

He paces a woman out jogging, friendly and nonthreatening, until she’s gone five miles and can’t manage speed anymore, only endurance, and not much of that. He drags her into the bushes. He could kill her quickly, but he doesn’t, because the crime this assassination is meant to look like would be sloppy. She dies howling, and nobody hears it.

He beats a man’s face in with a bowling trophy, and this is the first of his victims who understands what’s happening, who *knows* this is retaliation, and he begs, *begs* , for Will to do this some other way. *Just put a bullet in my head*, the man sobs, even as his zygomatic splits and his eye falls from the socket, hanging on by the bloody nerve.

Will is trapped, he is *trapped*, *he is trapped*, and he can’t put words to it because there are no words allowed to him, not when he’s crated like a dog in the recesses of his own mind. He rattles the bars. He shrieks. He calls to the blackness around him, and it answers, recognizing, remembering-

Something.

His brain begins to boil.

And then he is in Hannibal's office, panting and grinning and whispering, " *Am I unstable? Or have you destabilized me?"* and it's like he's seeing sunlight for the first time in years.

He can breathe.

He can *breathe*.

The water's cold now. Turns out it takes time to fit the puzzle pieces of a fractured mind back together. But at last, he thinks he has them slotted in, all the ones he hates and the ones he wants to cling to, now, early signs that the nightmare would soon be over. Hannibal, tying him to the chair out in the basement and telling him that his own self *knows*, now, what's happening to him. Hannibal in his own bedroom, holding him close and telling him that there are other, safer ways to freedom. Hannibal, waking with a gasp as the needle slips into his throat, staring up at him like he's…

Proud.

Will's brain is an overwhelming neurotransmitter storm, but he knows that he is safe, and that he is safe because of the man just upstairs.

He wants to see him. He wants to tell him it's over, and that they've won.

Will pushes his hair out of his face and shifts up and onto his knees. His thumb gives a dull throb. He's shaky but mobile, and he gets himself upright with a little more effort and shuts off the water, then stumbles out onto the bath mat. He catches himself on the sink as he lists to the side, and chances a glance in the mirror.

He looks pathetic. It makes him laugh.

He strips off the sodden clothing and towels himself dry. He combs his hair roughly, then staggers over to the bedroom and dresses. His head swims, but he doesn't let himself so much as touch the bed, instead going to the main room, to the laptop. It's still there, waiting. Maybe he can ring Hannibal's office, using that telemedicine app, tell him he's made another breakthrough. The *last* breakthrough.

But he can't find that option and, frustrated, looks around for any sign that Hannibal's come and gone already. A light lunch, maybe; according to the clock he was in the water for well over three hours. There's nothing, and a quick glance at the screens shows him Hannibal, so Will knows he's not with a patient.

Hannibal isn't cooking, though. He's not resting. He's not even watering his dining room herb collection. Instead, he's pacing, though he's trying not to be obvious about it. He's moving between rooms, fussing with statues and light fixtures and books, and doing absolutely nothing of substance.

Will's giddy exhaustion turns to wariness, and then he notices one more problem.

Winston is nowhere to be seen.

He almost goes to flip the shower on and off real quick, to see if Hannibal can't tell him what's happening, when Hannibal goes very still.

Will can't hear anything. Not a knock, not a doorbell, not voices. But Hannibal stares towards what Will thinks is the foyer, and then he's moving quickly, crossing each camera's view range until, finally, he's at the front door.

He opens it.

Winston is just barely visible past Hannibal's leg, sitting patiently on the doorstep.

Hannibal doesn't move for a long moment, and then he steps aside and lets the dog enter, just as the shadow of a member of the security detail closes fast on the doorstep, like he's jogging. Hannibal watches Winston trot into the kitchen, trailing his leash behind him, then faces the intruder, bodily blocking the door.

"Where is Agent Newman?" Hannibal asks. It's only barely audible, and Will leans in, even as he glances at the kitchen feed, where Winston is drinking heartily from his dish.

"Apologies, Dr. Lecter," the faceless agent replies. "He, uh, lost hold of Winston's leash in the park, and was looking for him up until a few minutes ago."

Will scowls. Out in Wolf Trap, with Will, that wouldn't have been a problem; Winston knew the area, and chose to stay close. But in Baltimore? With a stranger? And why hadn't Hannibal been allowed to take him out-

Will realizes how very lucky he is that Winston already knew to come *here* , and not go all the way back home.

And then Will realizes how fucked they are if anybody puts together *why* Winston would have adjusted so quickly.

Will's missed the rest of the conversation between Hannibal and the agent on his doorstep, but he doesn't miss the way Hannibal all but slams the door and does emphatically lock it. He stalks into the kitchen, only remembering to gentle his demeanor at the last second. Winston dances away from him all the same, but does, after a moment, allow Hannibal to unhook his leash.

When Hannibal goes to refill Winston's water dish, Will leaves the screens and jogs up the steps, then raps softly on the trap door.

It's a few minutes before he hears footsteps, but then the door lifts and Will can see Hannibal's shoes and Winston's muzzle poking between them. Winston's tail begins to wag, the soft whisking of his tail audible in the silence.

This isn't how Will imagined seeing him again, and for a moment, he can't find any words. There's too much to talk about. He settles for the most direct.

"Can you come down?" Will asks, looking up to Hannibal even as he rubs at Winston's snout.

Hannibal's expression is rigid, brittle, a thin veneer over rage, but then he takes a deep breath and nods. "Shortly, yes. Let me just make us a meal first. Winston can-"

"Keep him with you for now," Will says. "I, uh- I heard what happened."

Hannibal lets out a measured exhale. "We may need to make some... adjustments," he agrees. "Any requests for lunch?"

"Something quick," he says. "Something we can share?"

Hannibal's gaze drops to Will's mouth, no doubt remembering breakfast, and then he nods. "Half an hour."

Will does a half-hearted little salute, then retreats back down the stairs.

He settles down in front of the screens to watch Hannibal retrieve several items from the pantry and fridge, including a dish he suspects contains dough. Half an hour doesn't leave much room for bread, so sandwiches are probably out.

Will feels himself grin, despite his nerves, when Hannibal gets out what is, undeniably, a pizza peel.

This is nice, Will decides. He's bone-tired, wrung out, and they've got a lot to cover, but he's safe, at least for now, and Hannibal is art in motion. There are faint bruises on his wrists when he folds up his sleeves to start working the dough, and Will ignores the spark of anxiety in his gut that somebody will see them. Hannibal has the presentation of himself entirely under control. He always has.

The pizza is assembled and slid into the oven, and then Hannibal disappears into the pantry. There's a knock on the door, and Will climbs the steps just in time to receive two wine glasses and a freshly opened bottle of white wine.

"Ten more minutes," Hannibal says.

"I'll try not to finish the whole bottle without you."

Winston lays his head at the edge of the trap door and thumps his tail against the floor. Will's smiling at him when Hannibal closes the door again.

Ten minutes later, Will is sitting at the counter when Hannibal descends into the basement. Winston hesitates, no doubt remembering the chaos of the night before, but follows, eventually, lured by the scent of the food and the soft sound of Will rubbing his fingers against his thumb (which is, finally, feeling almost better).

"Pizza capricciosa," Hannibal says, settling the wooden cutting board down on the table, followed by plates that Will has no intention of using, or the silverware that's deposited after. "Traditionally prepared with mozzarella, mushroom, artichoke heart, black olive, tomato, and Italian baked ham."

"Traditionally?"

“I have substituted in prosciutto.” He cuts the crisp pizza into even slices with the flick of a wrist, and Will waits, patiently.

At last, Hannibal gives him his best conspiratorial smile. “In this case, the prosciutto comes from a midwife who poorly attended to a patient of mine’s miscarriage, leading to a very dangerous case of sepsis.”

Will is stunned into silence, before finally saying, “Please don’t tell me you have a cured human thigh hanging around somewhere upstairs.”

“Of course not. Far too recognizable. This is not, in the strictest sense, real prosciutto, as it is from a single cut of muscle, without bone, and only a partial skin covering. But the treatment was much the same, with all the attendant risk. Did you know that the failure rate of curing a ham for prosciutto is in some cases upwards of three percent or more? It takes many months, occasionally even years, to properly dry the cut, and any blood left in the meat, or pockets of air that prevent even salting and drying, can lead to rot, spoiling the whole endeavor.”

He does not, thankfully, try to make that into a metaphor for the careful cultivation of their relationship.

“*Hannibal*,” Will warns. “If the security detail sees that and has any reason to question it-”

“Then it’s important that we eat the evidence,” Hannibal finishes, smoothly. “Please, Will. I am as uneasy as you are. It won’t take long until somebody asks why Winston didn’t end up back in Wolf Trap.”

“They don’t know he’s a runner,” Will says. “Unless they ask Alana, or you. But why he knew and wanted to come *here* , specifically, after under twenty-four hours... why didn’t they let you take him on his walk, anyway?”

“Too dangerous, apparently. You would find it impossible to resist.”

Not entirely inaccurate, Will thinks, finally grabbing a slice of pizza. “I suppose it’s a reasonable concern.”

“Yes, and reasonable enough that they also resent having to walk your dog, leading to Agent Newman’s ridiculous showing, and hesitation to give chase when Winston took off. I’d imagine he thought Winston had spotted you.”

Will nods, regarding the thin, translucent shavings of meat on top of the pizza. He really should mind this, he thinks, this really shouldn’t have been such an easy adjustment. The kidney can be excused as a grand gesture, the beer as curiosity, but this…

He takes a bite. It’s delicious. Hannibal smiles and takes a sip of his wine.

“So,” he says after polishing off the slice, “I had another breakthrough.”

Hannibal sets his glass down and cuts off a bit of pizza with knife and fork. “Is that why you had the shower on for several hours?”

“I found the limit of your hot water heater,” he says, sitting back in his chair with his own glass of wine. “But it’s done. The reintegration, that is. I know what happened. What… I’ve done.” His smile falters, and he looks away. “A lot of very bad things,” he murmurs.

“There will be time to work through those in the future. How do you feel?”

He considers. “Whole,” he settles on. “Glad it’s over. Tender. I’ve learned more about myself than I think I ever wanted to.”

Hannibal leans in. “Such as?”

“That I did this to myself.” Will finishes off the glass of wine in one very large swallow, then sits back, staring up at the ceiling. “I knew what I was. What I was capable of. I feared it. I feared what would happen if- if I lost control. So I took advantage of what the CIA was doing to me and I shoved all my darkness into a little box and gave them the key, so at least *somebody* had a leash on it. And so I wouldn’t have to think about it anymore.” He laughs, weakly. “Got me maybe five years of not feeling like a monster.”

Hannibal stands to refill Will’s glass, and to circle into his line of sight again. “Was it a failure in technique?” he asks. “Or is it that that your exquisite cruelty is so deeply embedded in the core of you that while you could redirect the first wellspring of your youth, another would have always split the surface one day?”

Will regards Hannibal. “You dredged the riverbed to strengthen the flow,” he says, sliding his thumb along the bowl of the glass. “But you didn’t drill the well.”

Hannibal smiles. It’s very fond.

“Last night-” Will starts, then falls off, unsure of what to say that hasn’t already been said, or, more importantly, done. But he doesn’t know what happens next. This is good, and gentle in its way, and it can’t carry the weight of them, can it?

“You gave me a rare gift, Will,” Hannibal finishes for him, when Will cannot. “And I owe you my thanks, and my apology for nearly losing you.”

“I could have killed you.” He swallows, suddenly nervous. “That wasn’t- I wasn’t bluffing. You’re no longer my handler.”

“Nor do I wish to be.” Hannibal lingers a moment longer, so close Will could touch him, then circles back around the table to sit once more. He sips his wine, begins to eat again. “Was there a point at which you *intended* to kill me?”

Will shakes his head. “Not really, no. But I wanted you to know I could. I wanted you to understand that… we’ve become equals.”

“We have always been equals.”

“You can’t actually believe that,” Will said, shaking his head, “or you never would have needed to lie to me. You saw the *potential* in me to be your equal.”

“And now that potential has come true. And we are both still standing.”

“Which presents the question, what happens *now*?” He looks at Winston, who has settled by his feet but is not sleeping, too wary to let his guard down just yet. “The security detail is becoming worryingly intrusive. And if anybody does question Winston’s behavior, that’s more reason for them to enter at odd hours. If we’re lucky, they’ll just think I’ve snuck into your house somehow, but they’re just as likely to figure out that you’re hiding me.”

“I think regular mealtimes may need to be put on hold after this one,” Hannibal agrees. “I’ll make sure you have access to nonperishable, ready to eat items. We can communicate through the telemedicine app.”

“And what? We just run out the clock?”

“I thought I might extend an offer of therapy to the staff at the BSHCI.”

Will finishes another slice of pizza. “Particularly to one Matthew Brown, I assume?”

Hannibal nods. “We could attempt a second Abigail Hobbs. I could find a way to set him up for your death, then deliver him to Jack. It might end things sooner.”

Will shakes his head. “You can’t, not without an easy way to get in and out unseen.”

Hannibal looks like he wants to argue, but at last he sits back in his chair, conceding. “Then we must simply wait out the FBI’s coffers. Regardless, I’m already preparing a new identity for you. Once you can leave the house, you can start a new life.”

Without you? Will thinks, and suddenly his appetite is entirely gone. “They’ll notice Winston disappearing,” he hears himself say, but his mind is racing too much, too fast, too viciously. He doesn’t *want* to start a new life somewhere else after this, alone and waiting for when the violence inside him rises too high. He doesn’t want to live in this basement his whole life either, though.

Hannibal is articulating a plan to handle Winston’s disappearance, and Will doesn’t care, because it is taking all the effort he can bring to bear not to demand Hannibal come away with him. Leave behind his whole life, and tip them both fully into the darkness, into an ocean of blood that there would be no coming back from. It’s ridiculous. Risky. Not what he wants.

(That’s a lie. That’s a lie, and he really needs to stop lying to himself.)

“Will?”

Will lifts his eyes to Hannibal’s face. Thinks of every moment they have spent in this pressure cooker of a house, of the way Hannibal looks at him, of the way it felt to rut against him, kiss him, dissolve into him.

“Come with me, Hannibal,” Will says.

Hannibal sets his glass down, his expression unreadable. “You’d ask me to give up my home. My life.”

“Not your life. This is just- stage dressing. You enjoy it, but it isn’t you.” Will stands and comes around the table, slow and steady, as if Hannibal is liable to spook. “You don’t have to leave it. I won’t make you. But I want you to come with me, Hannibal.”

Hannibal’s tongue peeks out, wets his lower lip. His eyes never leave Will. “Where would we go?”

“Wherever you want to take us,” Will says. “I’m sure you have contingencies. Other homes across the world.”

“And you’d go with me? Just like that?” Hannibal asks, and his voice is tight with- something. Self control? A defense against hope, against belief. “Not because you have no other options, but because you want to?”

Will nods. Hannibal, too, rises from his seat, and they’re so close now that Will can feel the heat of him. “Because you’re mine, until one of us dies,” Will says.

Hannibal considers, then reaches up one hand to cup the back of Will’s neck. Will pushes into the touch.

“When Jack’s men are recalled, we’ll go,” Hannibal vows.

Will shakes his head, settling one hand on Hannibal’s chest. His heartbeat is even. So is Will’s, even as he murmurs, “It’s too dangerous to wait them out. It’s barely been a week and they’re already suspicious of *something* . And if I’m wrong and how Abigail handled Miriam’s body ends up pointing Jack at you, they’ll be pulling both of us out of here in cuffs.”

“Then what do you suggest we do?” Hannibal asks, and for all that his heart is steady, he is breathless.

Will huffs a shaky little laugh. “Easy,” he says. “Save ourselves. Kill them all.”

Hannibal makes a small, desperate sound, like he’s been gutted, and then hauls Will tight against his body and devours him.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Will groans and squirms. His elbow knocks into his unused plate, shoving it to the bare edge of the table.

Hannibal lifts his head to glare at it.

"Floor?" Will suggests. "Don't suggest the bed, I'm not fucking on that thing."

He almost laughs at Hannibal's affronted expression as he leans up, pressing firm against Hannibal's chest. Slowly, he gets them both upright, gets his feet on the floor. "Come on," he murmurs, nuzzling at the underside of Hannibal's jaw. "Think of it as coming full circle."

--

Will and Hannibal resolve some tension (😏) and enact their escape.

(WE DID IT Y'ALL! WE GOT TO THE BONING. Thanks as always to @chaotic_plotter for being the best beta in the world. Epilogue coming tomorrow!)

Will moans as Hannibal pushes him against the table.

There's too many things in the way, plates and glasses and a half-eaten, still-warm pizza, and Will cares about *none* of it, nothing except the searing heat of Hannibal's lips and tongue, and the feel of his waistcoat and dress shirt beneath Will's grasping, searching hands. He does note, distantly, that Winston is still there, at their feet, head lifted in concern (this is not unlike Will collapsing, drugged, into Hannibal's arms, but Winston can't know that). Will doesn't do anything about it, though, just drinks Hannibal in like he's dying, like he's drowning. Spreads his legs just enough for Hannibal to get in between them, then clamps them around his hips.

It's almost exactly how they'd been interrupted with the news of Miriam Lass's death, and simultaneously worlds apart. Will marvels at it as Hannibal breaks the kiss to nip and suck at the line of his jaw, the column of his throat.

"Should've done this last night," Will gasps. "Didn't- didn't want to ruin the moment, but the way I had you tied up-"

Hannibal bites. Will moans and arches, body rigid, cock aching. "You would have ruined the moment," Hannibal agrees, and his voice is hoarse. "And I would have let you."

Will laughs. “I half expected, when I asked the other me to get you somewhere we could talk, that I’d wake up- I don’t know, riding you like a pogo stick, or something.”

He’s answered with a groan, and the complete and sudden stillness of Hannibal’s hands on him, just below the hem of his shirt. Hannibal lifts his head and his pupils are wide and dark and deep. “*That* I would not have consented to,” he says, but the insistent jut of his erection says that the mental image isn’t entirely objectionable.

Will has to agree. He’s glad it didn’t happen that way, but fuck, the idea is persistent. “How much time do we have?” he asks, fingers getting to work on Hannibal’s buttons. (Far too many buttons. Maybe it’s smarter to leave it all on?)

“As much as we want,” Hannibal replies, pushing Will back just far enough to tug Will’s shirt over his head and toss it aside.

(Winston gets up to investigate it, and then, seemingly understanding that Will is entirely fine with this turn of events, takes the shirt and pads off to the bedroom. Will is only distantly aware of the click of his nails.)

“We have to be smart about this,” Will protests, even as he lifts his hips and squirms out of his pants and boxers. “Can’t- can’t let them suspect another thing until it’s time.”

“Then ten minutes more. Maybe fifteen.” Hannibal glances at the screen with an unbridled sneer. “Not nearly enough time.”

“Then stop complaining and get inside me.”

Hannibal stills, then breaks away from Will and strides purposefully to one of the supply cabinets. Will watches, fascinated and leaking against his stomach, as Hannibal retrieves a few plastic packets of-

“Lube?”

“It has medical applications,” Hannibal says, crossing back to Will and claiming his mouth again. He eases Will back across the table, broad hands sliding over his ribs, his hips, his thighs. Will groans and squirms. His elbow knocks into his unused plate, shoving it to the bare edge of the table.

Hannibal lifts his head to glare at it.

“Floor?” Will suggests. “Don’t suggest the bed, I’m not fucking on that thing.”

He almost laughs at Hannibal’s affronted expression as he leans up, pressing firm against Hannibal’s chest. Slowly, he gets them both upright, gets his feet on the floor. “Come on,” he murmurs, nuzzling at the underside of Hannibal’s jaw. “Think of it as coming full circle.”

Will slides to his knees, and starts working Hannibal’s belt open.

“Do you remember that, now?” Hannibal asks, breathless, one hand sliding into Will’s hair. He looks torn between desperate hunger and deep tenderness.

Will feels the same. Will also feels riotously nervous and plows on ahead to get past it. “I do,” he says, sliding the leather tongue from the buckle, tugging next at the button and zipper. “Enough. Bits and pieces. *Hannibal*,” he groans, when Hannibal’s hand tightens and hauls his head back a few inches.

“Forgive me, Will, but-”

“I want this,” Will says. He swallows, and it has a rough edge. “If that’s what you’re worried about, *don’t*. I’ve been dreaming about this since- since the second night I was here, and I’ve fought against it as much as I’m going to. I’m sick of fighting.”

Hannibal’s grip eases, fractionally. “What did you dream of?” he asks, even as he undoes his fly with his other hand. His voice is rough and low and cracking, and Will’s arousal spikes.

“You bending me over the kitchen counter,” Will says, wrapping one arm around Hannibal’s thighs. “Then fucking me in front of the entire security detail.”

Hannibal opens his mouth to say something just as Will leans forward and closes his lips around the head of his cock. Whatever word it was going to be loses coherency, and Hannibal chokes on it, eyelids fluttering, hand fisting in Will’s curls.

He looks as undone as he had as Will had fed him, and Will grins as he swallows down another few inches of cock.

It’s been years since he’s done this, but hunger and need make up for any loss of skill. They’ve only got a few more minutes, and this is just an appetizer; it just has to get Hannibal to *stop talking* . There will be time for talking later. For now, Will presses the flat of his tongue along the underside of Hannibal’s cock as he takes him deep, just to the edge of his gag reflex, then pulls back with hollowed cheeks. Hannibal’s hips jerk, possibly unintentionally, and Will grins.

He’s never done this to Hannibal before. He *knows* that, now, and it’s so much better, to know what territory is still unmapped. To get to do it for the first time *himself*.

Hannibal’s grip tightens, and Will stills, then pulls off with a wet pop. Hannibal is panting, staring down at him, mouth open. His tongue swipes over his bottom lip.

Will quirks a brow and eases backward, pulls his knees out from under him and spreads his legs.

Hannibal’s on the floor, on top of him, inside of one heartbeat. His hands slide over Will’s abdomen, then leave, and Will hears the tear of the lube packet.

“At the soonest opportunity,” Hannibal murmurs into his ear as two of his long fingers slip behind Will’s balls, “I’m going to take you apart over *hours*.”

Will’s retort is cut short by the gentle brush of slick fingers over his hole. His belly clenches, hot and liquid, and he hikes one leg over Hannibal’s still-clothed hip. “Did you-” he starts, then gasps as one finger breaches him, his head falling back, eyes closing.

Hannibal pauses, in barely to the first knuckle. Will spasms around him and whines.

“Did I?” Hannibal prompts.

Will opens his eyes again to glare a warning at Hannibal, who despite his vocal composure already looks entirely wrecked. “Did you- avoid anything *penetrative*-” (Hannibal presses the rest of the way into him and Will jerks his bent leg, half-kicking Hannibal in retribution) “-because you didn’t want to leave evidence?”

Hannibal leans in to brush his lips over Will’s mouth, but pulls back when Will tries to deepen the kiss. “No,” he says, crooking his finger, pushing down at the edge of Will’s rim to loosen the muscle. “Though I can’t say it didn’t occur to me.”

Will rocks his hips, this time with rhythm, with purpose. He’s rewarded with another finger. “Then why not?” he asks, breathing around the intrusion. It feels good but not *perfect* yet, and he has half a mind to grab Hannibal’s tie to move this along. But he wants to know, first, remembering the flash of emotion he’d seen in that video of Hannibal confronting Will’s other self. “Was it because you felt cheated? Were you *jealous* of him? Of me?”

Hannibal answers with a low rumble that’s almost a snarl, and he adjusts the angle of his fingers. Will’s back arches unbidden as he moans.

“The two of you together,” Hannibal murmurs, roughly thrusting once, twice, then adding a third finger to the press of him, “are *insufferable*.”

Will laughs. “You love it, though,” he says before he can stop himself. But as soon as the words are out, he goes still. Realizes that he doesn’t know that, not really.

He hadn’t stopped to think of himself as being somebody *new*, unfamiliar to Hannibal even as Will now feels entirely whole.

Staring up at Hannibal, Will suddenly feels not just naked, but flayed. Vivisected, trembling and unsure where just a moment ago he was so certain.

Hannibal gazes down at him. Will barely feels him remove his fingers, but he does feel the *loss* of it trembling through him. *Don’t go*, he thinks, desperately.

He doesn’t go. He cups Will’s jaw with his dry hand and leans in to kiss his brow, even as his other hand slicks his cock and lines it up with Will’s entrance. “I do,” Hannibal tells him. “And I am honored that you’ve shown me the whole of you.”

Will’s eyes burn, and he can’t find the words, and then Hannibal thrusts into him, slow and steady and unrelenting, and Will whispers, “*Fuck*.”

That about sums it up.

The floor is hard against his shoulder blades as Hannibal lifts his hips up to improve the angle. It’s cold, his skin only having warmed it up a few degrees so far. There’s a drain not five feet away from him, and fluorescent lights beating down on them, and it is the best thing Will has ever felt. He winds his arms around Hannibal’s shoulders to keep himself from

sliding over the tile, and Hannibal rocks into him a few times, stretching him, filling him, making a place inside of him.

“Good?” Hannibal murmurs, body trembling with restraint. There’s enough space between their faces that Will can see every flicker of emotion over Hannibal’s. Need and hunger and devotion and utter vulnerability.

Will nods, weakly.

Hannibal smiles. “I avoided doing this because I wanted you to remember it. To choose it. To see me, and with everything between us, still accept me. So yes, Will. I was jealous of everything I almost had, but couldn’t reach.”

Will huffs a short, broken laugh. “ *Knew it* ,” he says. “From the first time I saw that video. It was so clear that you were mine, and anything less was unacceptable.”

“Entirely,” Hannibal murmurs. “I could never have settled for just a part of you. That I thought so for even a minute…”

“God, Hannibal- move, please move, I’m not sure I can handle it if we have to cut this short.”

Hannibal hums agreement and kisses him again, tongue delving in as his hips begin to rock.

Will’s hands clutch at Hannibal’s shoulders, then slide up to the nape of his neck, plunging into the fine, lightly gelled hair there. Will’s entire weight comes to rest on his shoulders as Hannibal fucks into him with increasing intensity, until the two of them are not so much kissing as panting in to each other’s mouths. Hannibal’s fingers dig divots into Will’s ass, and the fly of his slacks rubs hard against Will’s thighs, and Will cries out from the stimulation, writhing and bucking. The buttons and rough wool of Hannibal’s waistcoat rub along the length of his cock, they cling so tightly together, and it’s almost too much.

He tips his head back and Hannibal drops his mouth to Will’s throat, nipping and sucking and laving the cords of his muscle with the hot flat of his tongue. His cock slides over Will’s prostate on every thrust, fierce and rapid, leaving nowhere to retreat to. Will whines, rutting against Hannibal’s belly, and it is so much like the mind-blotting, soul-trembling pleasure of his dream that for half a second he thinks this can’t be real.

And then Hannibal shifts, hauling Will tight against him. He tugs *up* and leans back, and Will barely manages to stay astride him as they sit up, as Will spills into his lap. He’s overstimulated and it almost hurts as the position change drives Hannibal still deeper into him, and he writhes and rocks to relieve the ache.

“Almost,” Hannibal murmurs against his ear, and the rasp of his voice makes Will shudder. “Just a little more. Let me feel you. Take what you need.”

“Can’t you do all the work?” Will gasps, barely able to understand words, let alone make them. But he sets his hands on Hannibal’s shoulders and rolls his hips, lifting up a little more each time. Every movement makes Hannibal shiver and moan.

“And have you tease me later for denying you your agency?” Hannibal retorts, jerking his hips up in answer.

Will almost assures Hannibal that he would *never*, but by that point, it feels too good again, and he is riding Hannibal with all the wildness of his buried self. Every downthrust makes his breath catch and his spine go rigid, and it’s so good, it’s not enough, he could do this for hours and never tire of it, and-

And Hannibal’s hand comes between them, just enough to grab his cock and spare it another raw scrape against the wool of his waistcoat, and then he’s coming, hot and wet and liquid, all over the both of them, biting down on a wail, scrabbling for some handhold against the tide.

Hannibal’s hands drop back to his hips and grind him down through his spasms until he, too, muffles a cry in Will’s shoulder and spills inside him.

They stay buried in one another, trembling, for at least a minute. *We don’t have minutes*, Will thinks, before petulantly letting himself go boneless anyway.

“Will,” Hannibal murmurs when his knees finally register that they’re aching. He lets Hannibal guide him up and back, so that he can at least sag against the floor.

He feels himself leaking, and is almost embarrassed. Then he takes a good look at the disaster that is Hannibal Lecter.

Rumpled, creased slacks, reddened lips, and some very damning stains on his nice waistcoat. Will grins. “How’s *that* for the spank bank?”

“*Vulgar* thing,” Hannibal complains, and Will leans in to kiss it from his lips.

“Good thing you’ve got a shower down here,” Will murmurs.

“But no spare suits, I’m afraid,” Hannibal says as he stands, grimacing and looking down at himself. He undoes his waistcoat and folds it neatly, semen stains hidden from the wider world. He still looks entirely debauched. “At least there’s nothing notable above the neck.”

“It looks like I used your mouth as a chew toy.” Will’s sure he looks worse, but *Will* doesn’t have telemedicine appointments.

Hannibal looks like he can’t decide between being annoyed or pleased by that.

“It’s not *that* bad,” Will assures him. “Just- set up your webcam so you’re backlit, or something. How good’s the lighting in your study anyway?”

“You’ll find out at your appointment at two thirty,” Hannibal says. “Unless your busy schedule prohibits?”

Will rolls his eyes, reaching for his discarded pants. “I’ll be there. We can talk about Matthew Brown.” He dresses, wincing a little as his ass protests. Then he gives a short whistle, and Winston peeks out from the bedroom. “Come on, go upstairs, the both of you.”

Both of them regard him as if he's completely lost his mind and, in a sense, Will supposes he has. He's surprisingly happy about it

Hannibal picks up the pizza peel, studying Will closely. "Will, you rightly pointed out that my plan to frame him for your murder is too complex."

Will grins. "Yeah. But I've had an idea that I think you'll like even more. You should reach out to him about that appointment."

Matthew Brown books the appointment.

Hannibal turns on his study's camera feed just before the scheduled time, a few days after tearing into each other on the murder basement floor, and Will settles in for the show. It's his first real look at Matthew; all their encounters at the BSHCI had been grazing brushes, Will aware of Matthew's attention but not thinking much of it, Matthew not yet ready to be seen.

He's ready to be seen, now. It's extremely obvious from the first sentences exchanged that Matthew has said yes to Hannibal's offer of therapeutic sessions purely to mine the doctor for scraps about Will's life, and Hannibal indulges.

Hannibal is very good at what he does, and Will appreciates the opportunity to observe. To watch as even as he feeds bits and pieces to the beast on his computer screen, he also unspools the fabric of him for Will to see.

Matthew Brown ultimately boils down to a few well-defined traits.

He is and has been overlooked for much of his life, starting even before his institutionalizations. He knows exactly what makes people underestimate him, and uses it to his advantage. He has a tendency towards and the desire to be cruel, but also knows that resisting that urge in a place saturated with it gives him a clearer head and a leg up.

And, more than anything else, he is *lonely*.

He wants to be seen. He is *desperate* for Will to see him, to join him, and it is a close cousin to what Hannibal wants from Will. The differences are that Hannibal sees the *truth* of Will, and always has, and that Hannibal has never sought his validation, only his company.

It's amazing, how much those differences alter the flavor of a man.

In a perfect world, they'd have weeks to orchestrate this. Hannibal could drop hints, the gentlest waft of the scent of prey, and Matthew would have come to them almost without having to ask. But Will is certain they don't *have* weeks, and it's too odd for Hannibal to insist on daily sessions.

So, just like Will suggested, Hannibal drops the curtain. When Matthew pushes, halfway through the session, with an, "Aren't you worried he's going to come after you, Dr. Lecter? He said a lot of terrible things about you during his stay at the BSHCI," Hannibal goes still.

Pauses, as if considering.

It's very effective, even if from the camera angle Will can only really see a back three-quarters view of Hannibal's face. Just the curve of his cheekbone, the jut of his chin. A brief movement of his eyelashes.

"He did, that is true," Hannibal admits, and leans in a little toward his webcam. "But I'm not worried, Mr. Brown. Would you like to know why?"

Will can see Matthew perfectly, though of course he's tiny on the screen Will is watching. His own confident, swaggering mask goes still. His throat works.

"Why not?" he asks. "Some *whatever happens, happens* bullshit?" His voice is tinny between two sets of speakers.

"Because I know exactly where he is," Hannibal replies. His throat works as if he's nervous himself. *That* is an act.

This is a risk, of course. Matthew *could* turn Hannibal in. But he won't.

He leans in.

"Now that's interesting, Dr. Lecter," Matthew says, eyes almost glowing even on the little screen. "Because I've been trying to get in touch with him myself."

That evening finds Hannibal cooking for seven.

Will and Matthew are not on the formal guest list. Instead, Hannibal has asked several of the security detail members in for a small dinner, as an apparent olive branch for how curtly he has rebuffed their intrusions in recent days. Three agents are all the detail can spare, the same number as might be posted within the house instead of on additional points around the perimeter.

(One of them is Agent Newman. Will hadn't requested that; it's entirely a gift from Hannibal.)

The remaining three are outside, awaiting doggie bags, hopefully growing irritated instead of suspicious.

Will watches from his usual seat in the basement. Matthew Brown watches, presumably, from a seat outside of 5 Chandler Square, keeping an eye on the remaining external security and waiting for his chance.

Winston is not visible on camera, but Will knows he's in the pantry, on his new dog bed that neatly covers the trap door. He'd be there regardless, and the bed makes it look intentional. Winston's wary but unflinching gaze likewise discourages would-be searchers.

Subduing six FBI agents without any of them getting out a call for help will be a challenge, and separating them into two groups is the most Hannibal can do to stack the deck in their favor without raising suspicion in and of itself. Will doesn't know the layout of the house half so well as Hannibal does, but Hannibal is the only one who can get outside easily. So the

moment Hannibal leaves the house, Will is due upstairs for his one and only appearance as Will Graham as Jack now sees him, clever and deadly and full of fury.

They figure that, between the two of them, they'll have maybe ten minutes at the outside to take all six agents down. If they're lucky, Matthew will handle at least one of the agents on the street; if they're unlucky, Matthew will get himself radioed in, and they'll have to accelerate the rest of the plan.

Will should be terrified. And he is, somewhere in the back of his brain, but at the *front*, he's giddy. Excited. *Hungry*.

Hannibal pulls what looks like a tray of baked scallops on the shell from the oven. The shells are real, but the meat inside is made of- well, Will isn't entirely sure on this one. Some kind of emulsified, molecular-gastronomy derived gel. There's some leeway in that it's going to be covered in a light golden sauce that will blister beneath the broiler just before it's served.

The actual scallop meat was thrown out this morning. The seafood the security detail delivered had been, as anticipated, sub par, even with the detail knowing that they'd be getting some of it for dinner. *Absolutely astonishing*, Hannibal had said. *It's as much ignorance as malice*.

That perhaps should have made Will regret this, that hint that they're not in as much danger as Will originally suspected, but the risk is still too high, and Will is committed.

Hannibal turns to put a few finishing touches on the bento boxes he's made for the three agents outside, these featuring less supposed-seafood, but just as much human flesh, all of it still ridiculously sculptural. Will had suggested just serving the agents the ingredients they'd procured, but Hannibal had refused; even as a mocking last meal, he would not relent on quality. The bento boxes contain seasoned and pigmented rice in the shape of a dancing carp, a curry made with human thigh, a light salad adorned with roses made of thin-sliced radishes, and three dumplings each, all with different-colored wrappers. None are drugged.

It's a shame these won't even get eaten.

Hannibal checks that all the rest of the dishes are at a proper stage to be left unattended, and then picks up the bentos. "I'll just step outside to deliver these," he says, and Will smiles.

"Dr. Lecter, you know I can't let you do that," Agent Newman says. He glances at his compatriots. They all look awkward, unable to accept wine while on duty, not sure what to make of Hannibal's elaborate dance around the kitchen. "I can take it out."

"Nonsense," Hannibal says. "I insist on delivering dinner myself, if I cannot play host in here." He circles around the island and walks past Newman without hesitating, and Newman scowls for a moment. It almost looks like he's going to stop Hannibal bodily, but Will sees the moment the opportunity clicks for him. He grabs his radio off his hip and calls out to the team outside.

Hannibal is met at the door by his expected escort. Not thirty seconds after the front door closes, all three agents inside the house are taking their brief free rein to snoop.

It’s very rude.

It’s also exactly the cue Will was waiting on.

Will checks the selection of knives and tools he’s got on him, then climbs the murder basement’s steps for what will be, one way or the other, one of the last times ever. He nudges the trap door up. Winston’s weight shifts, then Will hears his nails click against the floor and strains of soft chamber music from the kitchen as the soundproofing is broken.

He finds the first agent in the study, rifling through files. He’s kept the lights out so as not to be noticed by Hannibal outside, and so nobody sees as Will steals in behind him. It’s child’s play to snap his neck, then lower him gently to the floor as if he’s sleeping.

The second is upstairs, near the bedroom. This one, too, Will kills without being seen, this time with a knife through the throat and then pulled, sharply, out the front of the neck, severing both the carotid and jugular without bothering with how the muscles of the man’s neck immediately try to tense and protect him.

Agent Newman is last, and this time, Will lets himself be seen. He lets the agent find *him*, in fact, when Newman re-enters the kitchen.

“Hello, Agent Newman,” Will says, smiling. “You really should have taken better care of my dog.”

Newman gets out half a scream before Will lunges, wrestling the gun away and snapping the safety in place before he can get a shot out. Shock is a handy thing, and it is heady, too. He looks into Newman’s eyes as he chokes the life out of him, shushing him gently even as his fingers crush his windpipe.

Winston whines from where he watches by the kitchen island.

The front door opens just as Will heaves the agent with the slit throat into one of the dining room chairs. Will goes still, then relaxes again as he hears no footsteps, no crackle of a radio. Newman’s radio, now clipped to his waistband, is also silent.

Hannibal appears in the dining room. Will can’t help his grin as he steps away from the table. Hannibal looks- alive. Deliciously, wonderfully alive. Bloodstained, bright-eyed, and no longer restrained by the requirements of his person suit.

“All done?” Hannibal asks, with a quick glance at the table, where two of Will’s victims now sit.

“All done, except for a last bit of lifting,” Will confirms. “And I cut the stove when the timer went off.”

“Very thoughtful of you,” Hannibal says, even as he sheds his blood-soaked jacket and waistcoat.

“Any sign of the guest of honor?” Will asks.

Hannibal shakes his head.

A steady, loud clapping comes from the hall.

“What a show, Mr. Graham!” Matthew Brown says, grinning as he enters the dining room and looks at the evidence of Will’s handiwork. His lisp has vanished, and his posture is entirely different from how he held himself in his role as BSHCI orderly.

It’s almost impressive.

“You got my message,” Will says, slowly, mind working, adjusting, recalculating. Matthew getting the drop on them wasn’t his first choice, but it was always a possibility, and it proves he was smart enough not to risk Will’s safety by ‘assisting’ Hannibal outside. He’s got at least some command over his eagerness.

Will can work with that. Adrenaline hums in his veins.

Matthew pauses a few feet from Hannibal, eyeing the blood on him, the mussing of his hair. “I did, thanks for that. You can’t begin to understand what a relief it was, finding out you were okay. And getting the good doctor to do your dirty work for you, even after all the abuse you hurled his way - I’d love to know your secret.”

“CIA programming,” Will deadpans.

Matthew laughs. Hannibal smiles and steps aside, as if in submission. They’re all in on the joke, after all.

(Well, Matthew *thinks* he is.)

“I always knew you were more than what you appeared to be,” Matthew says, dropping his voice into the conspiratorial register. “That you were hard at work getting the pieces where you wanted them.” His gaze flicks to Hannibal, who is gazing at Will with adoration.

“And then, that show you put on at the BSHCI - absolute genius. They won’t tell us how Dr. Chilton’s doing, but I think he’s not going to be able to return. Too many nightmares in the BSHCI basement for him now.”

That’s not the worst outcome of this whole mess, Will thinks. “I just gave Frederick a bit of perspective on his therapeutic techniques,” he drawls. “They come with… unintended consequences.”

Matthew grins. “He’s clumsy,” he agrees.

“The thing is, Matthew,” he says, picking each word with care, “that you really did complicate things for me, killing the bailiff.”

“I know,” Matthew says, and he looks almost apologetic. “I should have talked to you first. Planned it out. You would’ve told me not to use a gun, I know that now.”

“I would have told you not to do it at all. Because I’m not what you think I am. I’m not the Copycat. I never was.”

Matthew frowns, confused, unable to make sense of that denial in the midst of the carnage around him.

“But I *am* the Chesapeake Ripper,” Hannibal explains, pleasantly, and slams his fist into Matthew Brown’s diaphragm.

The younger man goes down with a startled gasp.

They only have a handful of seconds to immobilize him, but all the more effective techniques to subdue him would have cost them too much time waiting for him to recover. They work well as a team, though, hauling the thrashing younger man into the chair at the head of the table and ziptieing him in place. Matthew laughs with shocked rage, and nearly smashes his forehead into Hannibal’s, but Hannibal is expecting it and steps away.

“I’ll be just a moment,” Hannibal says, and then slips away into the other room.

Matthew glares up at Will, panting, as Will seats himself on the edge of the dining table. He watches as Matthew rocks the chair, tests it for weaknesses, and nearly unbalances. Will catches the seat with his foot and eases it back to level.

“I want to *help* you, Mr. Graham,” Matthew pants, voice tight. “We’re both hawks, you and I, we’re both the same. I don’t- I don’t care that you didn’t kill the Hobbs girl, I-”

“Stop talking,” Will says, and to his credit, Matthew does. “Impressive job on Ms. Lounds, but I wouldn’t call it helping. After all, it did kick the hornet’s nest a little. If I’d been free at the time, and angling to get my revenge, I would have been pretty pissed. Security ramped up even more after that little stunt.”

“But you could have come to me. You *knew* it was me, didn’t you?”

“I did. But I also know you only killed the bailiff, not the judge.”

Hannibal re-enters the room, bag of supplies in hand. “*I* killed the judge. Thank you for the inspiration, Mr. Brown,” he says as he comes to Will’s side.

Matthew’s expression is pained, as if he isn’t sure whether to be furious or awed.

“Look, Matthew,” Will says. “You made my life hard, but I did ask you to come here. Because you’re right, you can help me.”

Matthew’s gaze tracks back to him, wary, even as Hannibal crouches beside him and loops a tourniquet around his upper arm.

“It’s really simple, at the core,” Will says. “Jack Crawford isn’t ever going to believe we’re dead without our bodies, no matter how much of our blood we splash around. And if we just disappear into the night, he’ll be on our trails by daybreak. But throw a new element into the

mix - a bullet in a Copycat victim, for instance - and everything goes haywire as they try to figure out what the new variable *means*."

"In this metaphor," Hannibal adds, "you are the bullet. Make a fist, please."

Matthew jerks in the chair and does not do as he's told, so Hannibal grabs his hand and does it for him. "You can't kill me. That's not different enough. So, what- you're going to cut my tongue out? My hands off? So I can't tell them?"

"You would make a terrible Lavinia," Hannibal says, and reaches behind himself for the tray of instruments. "No, we will be giving Uncle Jack a far more interesting conundrum to while away the hours of our escape."

Will watches as he retrieves the first syringe. "What, no pie jokes?"

Matthew looks between them, so confused he's speechless. (Clearly, the man doesn't know Shakespeare.)

Hannibal sends Will a chiding glance. "Poor taste," he says, and then slides the needle into Matthew's vein. "There, just give that a moment."

"This how you keep them alive while you gut them?" Matthew asks. His voice slurs on the last word, just a little.

"No," Hannibal says.

"Then what the *fuck* did you just give me?"

Will smiles. "Just a little something to loosen your tongue," he murmurs. "A little unorthodox therapy of our own. And I can promise you that Dr. Lecter is a far better therapist than Chilton. Far less clumsy."

Matthew laughs, though it's slurred, overly sharp. "Don't need therapy. I know who I am, Mr. Graham. Just like how I've always known who you are."

"Not all of it. And the devil is really in the details."

Then the drugs really kick in, and Matthew sags in his chair. His head lolls forward. Hannibal performs the second injection, and Will can *see* the jump of his pulse in his throat.

"Would you like to do the honors, beloved?" Hannibal asks. Will tears his gaze away from Matthew to find the doctor holding out what almost looks like a pen, save for the lens at one end.

Will closes his fingers around it carefully, then cradles it in his palm. It's such a small thing. Strange, to think if Hannibal had taken some other tack in inducing his encephalitic seizures, or if the lights in the BSCHI had been working properly, that he might have never reached this point.

Matthew begins to stir again. He lets out a low, garbled moan. The amphetamines have caught up with the sodium amytal and his brain must feel like it's made of molten metal. His eyelids flutter.

Will kneels before his admirer and lifts the light pen up. Matthew fixates on it, head weaving as he tries to hold his gaze steady.

"Hello, Matthew," Will says, his voice soft and gentle, almost sweet. "Just look right at me, and this will all go away."

He turns on the strobe.

They leave Matthew Brown seated at the head of Hannibal's dinner table. They didn't perform the whole, terrible fracturing that the CIA worked on Will's psyche. Even with their time constraints, it was unnecessary and (in Will's opinion) in bad taste. Instead, they had utilized exactly the sort of mental re-arrangement and memory manipulation that Chilton had hinted at the last time Will had been at his mercy. Just enough to erase the events of the evening, and to plant a confused thought in Matthew Brown's head that he'd killed the agents himself.

Those agents are sat around the table with him. The bowls of their abdomens teem with a cornucopia of ersatz seafood, all of it made from human flesh, down to the mousse piped into the prawn shells. Their own organs have been arranged into an elaborate centerpiece, and it is only the speed with which Will and Hannibal must work that keeps it from being tidy. There's no time to drain the bodies, and the room stinks like a charnel house.

Hannibal is clearly displeased with it, but there's only another hour or two at most before Newman is due to check in. They shower, change clothes, and take one last turn around the house, making sure it's as they mean to leave it.

It is. There's nothing else to do.

"Are you ready?" Hannibal asks, his hand on the door that will take Will outside of this house for the first time in well over a week. They each hold luggage containing their new identities and a few objects they've chosen to take with them. Will's packed the hair products Hannibal got for him, a few books from Hannibal's library, and the laptop. Hannibal's packing a little heavier: two garment bags, a set of medical supplies, rope, and knives, and a fresh new sketchbook and drawing supplies, scalpels included. A cooler holds snacks for the road and food for Winston, who sits patiently, waiting to see where they'll go. There's no blood at all in his long, lustrous fur.

Will looks back up at Hannibal, who is similarly spotless, and smiles. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, let's get out of here."

Hannibal leans in and kisses him. It is gentle, a quiet *thank you*, and Will can't sense the slightest trace of regret as Hannibal opens the door to the end of this life.

Will takes one last breath of *before* . He feels everything drop away from him, leaving him scoured. Clean. Entirely himself.

The world doesn’t go black, and they step out into it together.

Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The Bentley is three cars and two states behind them when they take their first actual break. There's nothing on the news about the massacre at 5 Chandler Square, but there will be. Luckily, they don't have to deal with CCTV or bored motel staff; Hannibal gets them to one of, apparently, many safe houses that he has the use of, if he doesn't own it outright. Winston stretches his legs, relieves himself out in the yard, and then comes inside with them to find a comfortable bit of carpet to curl up on.

He probably has the right idea. It's dawn. Will hasn't slept all night, and neither has Hannibal. By all rights, they should be collapsing into a bed in this small suburban house, and, well, they're probably going to end up there.

But for now, Will has Hannibal pinned against the first clear expanse of wall in the place, hands sliding up beneath his shirt, tongue making inroads toward his throat.

--

Will thanks Hannibal for all his hospitality.

Chapter Notes

(Bonus ending smut! Thank you to everybody who's read this far on what must be simultaneously the most bizarre AU I've ever written and the most canon-compliant exploration of these idiots' feelings I could've managed. And thank you to @chaotic_plotter for answering my plaintive "oh god how does one get a beta these days" tweet. I have a few other fics planned, and possibly one or two timestamps for this sucker, so please tag along at @serindrana if you feel so inclined.)

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"*Will*," Hannibal groans when he manages to roll his head far enough to the side to get a word in edgewise.

"If you're about to say this can wait," Will murmurs, nipping at Hannibal's ear, "I'm going to remind you that you already *made* me wait for three days."

"It was prudent," Hannibal protests, but it's token at best. He's as hard as Will is, and his thumbs have slipped under the waistband of Will's pants (still, unfortunately, from the Miriam Lass athleisure collection; Hannibal's clothes hadn't fit as well, and they haven't had time yet to resupply). "The security detail-"

"Is dead, and we're safe for the moment, and you can't expect me to just *go to sleep* after tonight." Will punctuates his argument by starting in on the fastenings of Hannibal's pants.

Hannibal squirms to help him, even as he snipes back, "Then you should have rested in the car. We'll need to keep moving soon enough."

"Not tired," Will lies, just as Hannibal gives in that last inch and kisses him again, fiercely.

In another fumbling minute, they're naked and making their way toward what Will assumes will be the bedroom. He doesn't care. He's too busy running his hands over the broad expanse of Hannibal's back. But then a thought occurs to him, and he lets go of Hannibal long enough to catch hold of a doorframe.

"Lube?" he asks, pulling away from Hannibal's mouth to give him an expectant - and plaintive - look.

Hannibal stills, then says something that *must* be a curse in a language Will doesn't know, and pulls away. Will appreciatively watches him stalk to the duffels they brought inside, crouch, and dig through an external pocket until he finds a proper bottle of it. (No medical overstock for Will tonight; he's getting the good stuff.)

The few feet between them, illuminated by honest to god *sunlight*, gives Will more perspective on the magnitude of the last week and a half than the five hours of driving prior, and for a second he's afraid he's going to lose his nerve. That he's going to regret this.

The regret doesn't come. Instead, he's just- happy. Steady. He's a killer in truth and entirety, there's no coming back from it, and he's less alone than he's ever been.

When Hannibal comes back to him, Will slides his arms around the man's waist and grins up at him.

"Hey," he says.

Hannibal's wolfish expression softens for a moment into something adoring and faintly wondering, as if the reality of this is still a surprise to him, too. "Hello, Will," he replies, and the kiss that follows is sweet, and gentle, and slow.

If the CIA has done one beneficial thing in the entirety of its existence, it must be this, Will thinks as they ease onto the mattress. Of course, it's only really beneficial to the two of them. For the rest of the world…

That's for later. Will sighs against Hannibal's lips, then pushes gently until Hannibal rolls onto his back and Will straddles one of his thighs. The bottle of lube rests beside Hannibal's hip, and Will grabs it even as he leans down for another kiss.

"You were perfect tonight," Will murmurs against his flushed skin. "Ever since I showed up on your doorstep, really, if we ignore the Chipotle incident."

Hannibal's hands tense on his hips for a moment.

"I have- still quite a bit to make up for, I feel," he says, after a moment's quiet.

Will shrugs. "We've ended up where we've ended up, and we're going where we're going. And for all the rest," he says, one hand dancing slowly down Hannibal's chest and stomach, "I think you really deserve a thank you for your hospitality."

Hannibal's exhale isn't *shaky*, but it is relieved. Wondering. He props himself up on one elbow, enough to push into Will's space and slide his lips along Will's throat.

Will lets his head fall back, rocking gently against Hannibal's thigh. Hannibal returns the favor.

"A host gift?" Hannibal murmurs against the ridge of his clavicle. "Very thoughtful of you."

"Yeah, but I'm terrible at picking gifts, so you need to tell me what you want."

Hannibal pulls back at that, gaze flicking up and down the naked length of him, and Will swears that if he says *you, just you*, he's going to bite him.

But that's not what Hannibal says. He says, "You inside me," and he is breathless, his eyes dark and hungry and fathomless. "I find I'm very tired of always being the one to intrude."

Will can't help his sharp little laugh at that. "Can't argue with you," he murmurs, sliding a hand along Hannibal's hip. "Are you sure, though?"

"Will-"

"I mean with all the driving ahead of us," Will assures him. "And the prep time we'd need."

Hannibal frowns, and then his expression softens into something thoughtful. With both hands spread warm across Will's waist, he eases Will off him, never breaking eye contact. "You said you remember it all - the time in my office, as well as the others?"

“Yeah,” Will says, heart beginning to pound. Because he does. More and more, the more he thinks about it. “What about it?”

“That night, in Wolf Trap. Would you be interested in a do-over?”

Will swallows, thickly. Nods. “Yeah. Yeah, that sounds good, as long as we leave out the sending me to a mental institution after.”

“I would never let them take you away from me again,” Hannibal assures him, voice low and sinful against Will’s lips. And then he laces their fingers together and pulls away to lie down on his side, and Will goes after, pressing his chest up along Hannibal’s back.

Because Will had been wrong, that night he’d found out just how intimate his other self and Hannibal had gotten, that night he’d theorized about exactly how Hannibal had left his other self sated and sleepy, enough that he hadn’t been able to stop Hannibal from shoving Abigail’s ear down his throat.

He’d assumed it had been Hannibal fucking between his thighs.

Will almost murmurs *Haven’t ever done this, actually*, but of course, he has. In his camp bed, clinging to Hannibal like a lifeline, rutting up against him, letting Hannibal guide but, ultimately, taking for himself. This time, *Will* guides them both. He slicks his cock and slides it between Hannibal’s legs, curling tight around him and holding him close. Hannibal shivers, twisting at the waist to ghost his lips over Will’s, and Will can’t help the slippery, desperate jerk of his hips, eyes closing for just a moment, lips parting. He wraps his lube-slick fingers around Hannibal’s cock in turn, and is rewarded by Hannibal rocking against him, fucking them both. It’s nothing like that night in Wolf Trap, and nothing like his dreams, and nothing like being fucked into the basement floor, and it is *perfect*. Soft and quiet, growing feverish, and Will makes himself open his eyes. Hannibal’s still twisted to see him, the line of his body stretched taut, his own eyes half-lidded, pupils blown. They’re not kissing. They’re panting too much to kiss.

And then Will pulls back a little farther than he intended, or Hannibal shifts his hips, and his cock slips a little higher and nudges at Hannibal’s entrance. Doesn’t go in, of course, but the shock of it stills them both.

Hannibal, infuriatingly, then circles his hips as if to draw Will in.

“I thought we agreed,” Will hisses, and he sounds a lot more desperate than he intended, and a lot less annoyed. He tries to reset them, but Hannibal moves again and instead Will is rutting into the cleft of his ass, and it’s so good he whines. It’s not as tight, but the angle is better, and it would be so easy to...

He lets go of Hannibal’s cock and grabs his thigh instead, still trying to fix this, but Hannibal uses the opportunity to roll over, pushing Will onto his back and straddling him.

“We didn’t agree. You asked if I was sure,” he says, eyes twinkling in the golden morning light. “I never gave you an answer, only an alternative. And as much as I enjoyed it…” He grins, and Will’s hips twitch unbidden. “I still know what I want.”

“Don’t know why I expected you to be reasonable,” Will grumbles, but his cock is hard and leaking, and he can’t look away as Hannibal rises up onto his knees, drags his fingers through the lube shining on his thighs, and starts working himself open. “You’re going to regret this when we’re back on the road, I’m just saying.”

Hannibal rolls his one unemployed shoulder in a lazy shrug, even as he pants softly and arches into his own touch, displaying himself without shame. “I have never shied away from the consequences of my actions,” he gasps,

“Except once you realized I was *in jail* because of you, and might not be getting out,” Will goads, and he knows it’s cruel, but he’s feeling more like Hannibal himself these days; sometimes he just wants to see what will happen.

What happens is:

Hannibal pauses, two fingers inside himself, and considers. “But if I hadn’t done that, I would never have known myself as well as I know myself now, with you. And I wouldn’t have you now. At all, perhaps.” He smiles, then, and removes his fingers. He positions them both, and Will settles his hands on his hips again.

“But you couldn’t have known it would turn out like this.”

“No,” Hannibal agrees, softly. “But we’re not talking about the rationality of my decisions, only my refusal to look back. Regret is pointless, Will. All we have is what we do next. All the rest is to be savored when we revisit it, the pleasure and the pain both.”

And then he sinks onto Will’s cock, his body burning and ravenous, and Will feels tears prick in his eyes.

If before was perfect, this is ecstatic.

Hannibal rides him with abandon, and Will can’t stop touching him, can’t look away, because the monster above him, *his* monster, is shockingly honest with every gasp that passes his lips, every tightening of his abdomen, every moment where he falters because it has, in the end, been a very long day. A very long *week*. A very long…

Life.

And now the walls are down, and all the ugliness mixes in with the beauty, and Will loses himself in the both of them.

After, sated and sore and exhausted, Will fights off sleep as Hannibal murmurs, “My sister’s name was Mischa.”

That afternoon, they stop at a smalltown post office with a shockingly useful lack of working cameras that has, in an otherwise unremarkable PO box, a few sets of clothes for Will ready and waiting. Otherwise, they only stop the car to let Winston out; otherwise, they drive.

That means eating in the car, too, but Hannibal seems to have predicted that as well. For a delayed breakfast there are wraps waiting for them in the cooler. For a late lunch, there's an entire carefully-wrapped charcuterie plate. Less handy for driving, but delicious, and it gives Will the opportunity to hand-feed Hannibal again, which-

Well. It's apparently becoming a thing. (For both of them, because Hannibal only suggested the plate once he was already in the driver's seat.)

The prosciutto from that terrible midwife has made an appearance again, but everything else looks surprisingly normal and store bought. Will considers it as he eats another morsel.

"Have you ever tried making human cheese?" Will asks.

Hannibal blinks. Cants his head without looking away from the road. "Consider the logistics of that for a moment, please."

Will does, and blanches. "Oh, god. Neverm- wait. Wait, *have* you?"

"No, Will." He chuckles, then glances over expectantly.

Will regards him for a moment, then places another bite of meat, cheese, and sliced baguette to his lips. Hannibal eats it daintily, and would have stared Will down the whole time if traffic didn't demand otherwise, Will's sure.

"However," Hannibal says after he's swallowed it down and tongued a miniscule crumb from the corner of his mouth, "were the circumstances to ever arise-"

"*No*," Will says, half laughing, half horrified. "No, absolutely not. I draw the line at human beer. In fact-"

He's cut off by a soft ringing, coming from one of Hannibal's two garment bags.

Will knows that ringtone, and from the way Hannibal stiffens, it's exactly what he thinks it is. Without a word, Will undoes his seatbelt and twists around. Winston snuffles at his hand and is rewarded with a few distracted pats before Will gets the bag's zipper open and finds the little burner phone tucked in the pocket of the suit. (The charcoal suit with red window paning; Will smiles, despite his pounding heart.)

He gets back into the front seat and answers the call.

"Hi," he says, and then waits, because he's not stupid; there's a non-zero chance that Abigail's calling because she's in FBI custody, or that it won't be Abigail on the other end of the line at all.

"Will?" Abigail asks, and she sounds relieved, not nervous.

He glances at Hannibal, but Hannibal only nods, encouraging him. "Yeah, it's me. Are you…?"

“I’m okay,” she says. The line goes quiet, then, and it’s hard to hear if she’s breathing on the other end over the road noise. He holds his breath. At last, she clears her throat. “Is, uh. Is Hannibal there?”

“He’s driving,” Will says.

“Oh. Okay. Uh, so everything’s…?”

“Everything’s fine,” he says, with a soft, trembling smile. “Weird, but fine. He said you weren’t answering his calls.”

“Well, would you have? After…? I figured he’d be pissed.”

“He was.” Will winces. “But he knows it’s not your fault, and we worked it out.”

More quiet. He thinks it’s a relieved silence, but he could be wrong.

“You’re officially on the Most Wanted,” Abigail blurts.

He can’t help his startled laugh. “Took them long enough,” he says. “Just me, or is he on there too?”

“No, just you. They’re only citing the BSHCI escape, which is now actually on the news.” Another pause. “Tattlecrime isn’t really updating anymore, but, uh, it leaked somewhere else, that there was… Hannibal’s officially a missing person, but nothing else.”

“For now,” Hannibal murmurs, and of course he can hear the other side of the conversation, even over the engine. Hannibal pointedly glances at the phone, and Will rolls his eyes and puts it on speaker.

“Abigail,” Hannibal says, louder this time, “are you still at the house on the bluffs?”

Rustling. “Yeah,” Abigail says after a moment, and she’s changed tone of voice, a little more deferential, a little less conspiratorial. “Is that okay?”

“More than,” Hannibal says. “You’re free to stay there as long as you want. My arrangements for Europe in the fall will hold. You’re also free to leave, if you wish. If you’re waiting to hear that from me, that is.”

Quiet. Then Abigail takes a little, shaky breath that fills the car. “What if I wanted to come wherever you and Will are? For a little while, just to- catch up. Get my bearings.”

Will stares at the phone, then looks up at Hannibal. That’s not what he was expecting. He assumed she’d be ecstatic to get away free and clear, no longer beholden to anybody. “It won’t exactly be safe, Abigail,” he says.

“It will be,” Hannibal counters. “Should you wish to join us, we’ll meet you Kralendijk, Bonaire. The credit card I left with you will still be safe to use, as will your papers. Meet us there in a week. Call back with your travel information when you have it, please.”

Will blinks. “Bonaire?”

“It’s pleasant. Quiet. Good fishing. You’ll like it.”

“A week?” Abigail asks.

This, at least, Will knows the answer to. The last little bit of their goodbye to the States, the reason they’re driving south. “We have a few errands to run before he leave,” he tells her.

“Errands?” Abigail asks, with that particularly petulant teenager tone that means *I think you’re a fucking idiot*. “While there’s an FBI manhunt on?”

Will grins at Hannibal, and Hannibal’s eyes crinkle with quiet pleasure. “I have to say goodbye to an old friend.”

Winter nights in Louisiana get cold on occasion, temperatures dipping close enough to freezing that the lingering humidity crystalizes and clings. Sound carries differently, and tonight the house is quiet save for the soft thrum of a disused furnace shocked into action for the first time this year. The door hinges are oiled and the storm door’s off, so there’s nothing to slam.

He’s never been in this house before. Boundaries exist for a reason, work-life balance and all of that. But he’s been in houses like this before, and knows the people who live in them, so he goes to the kitchen. There’s a bottle of scotch in the fridge, a holdover from when the house’s owner didn’t have central air. Decades ago, but some things just hang on for life.

He leaves the lights off. He pours three glasses. His companion takes one, and they make a small and silent toast, then go settle into the main sitting room.

Half an hour later, the front door opens, soundless save for the change in air pressure.

Footsteps break the silence first, and then an older but steady hand flips the light switch.

Will smiles.

“Hello, Mr. Winston.”

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